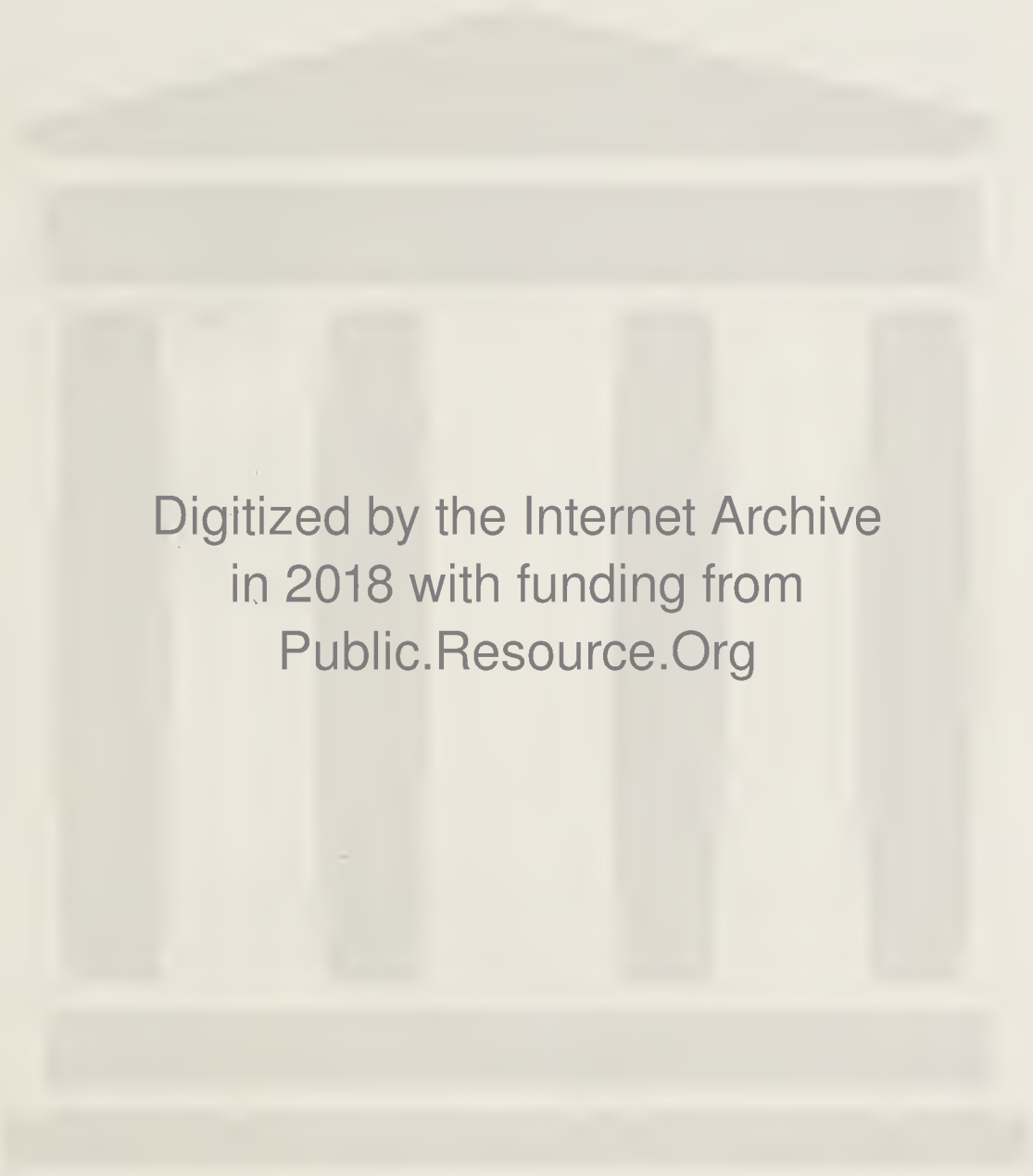


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GOPINATH BARDLOI

BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYYA

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BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYYA

PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
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ABOUT THE SERIES

The object of this series is to record, for the present and future generations, the story of the struggles and achievements of the eminent sons and daughters of India who have been mainly instrumental in our national renaissance and the attainment of independence.

The biographies are planned as handy volumes written by knowledgeable people and giving a brief account in simple words, of the life and activities of the eminent leaders and of their times. They are not intended either to be comprehensive studies or to replace the more elaborate biographies.

The work of writing these lives has to be entrusted to different people. It has, therefore, not been possible to publish the biographies in a chronological order. It is hoped, however, that within a short period all eminent national personalities will figure in this series.

Shri R. R. Diwakar is the General Editor of the series.

PREFACE

Gopinath Bardoloi was Assam's most well-known leader in the country during the thirties and forties of this century. He is rightly regarded as one of the makers of modern India. During the crucial days of transfer of power, it was he who mobilised public opinion against grouping Assam and Bengal under the Cabinet Mission Scheme and thus foiled the subtle attempt of the Muslim League to include Assam in East Pakistan. Happily, in this, Bardoloi received unstinted support of his ideological mentor, Gandhiji.

He was a self-made leader with many qualities of head and heart. His deep interests in sports, constructive work, theatre, history, tribal life and Indian spiritual tradition made him catholic in his outlook and taste. His untimely death was mourned universally. Dr Harekrishna Mehtab, the maker of modern Orissa, told me in 1980, "Assam was fortunate to have Bardoloi as her leader. Had he lived longer, Assam would have been spared of the present agonies." Dr Mehtab said this while the Assam movement on foreigners was at its height.

This short biography is an attempt at reconstructing his life in its most significant aspects. It cannot be called a complete biography. What I have tried here is to give a neat picture of this remarkable man as judiciously as I am capable of.

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The Man

GOPINATH BARDLOI had a many-sided personality. He had deep interest in history, music, arts, games, gardening, hunting, fishing, cooking, travelling and above all politics. He chose politics as his vocation, but the other interests never left him. Even when he was the Chief Minister of Assam, he often found time to attend a musical soiree arranged by his friends. His wife relates how he used to teach her culinary lessons on preparing good fish curries, and his youngest daughter still fondly recollects the moments of his pleasant intrusions into her musical classes, and how he surprised her by his knowledge of the ragas and *tanas*. He was fond of hunting, an aristocratic vice he had inherited from his political and social mentor, Tarun Ram Phookan, the legendary hero of the first Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam. Bardoloi was at ease with games like cricket and tennis, and was one of the best undergraduate actors of Shakespearean dramas in Assam. He was a brilliant student of history. It was his knowledge of the history of Assam that made him the foremost interpreter of Assamese aspirations in national politics during the critical days of partition. His deep interest in comparative religions sprang from his desire to weld men of different religious communities into a nation. Like the best men of his generation, he discovered quite early that for a nation trying to be free, politics was not only unavoidable, but it was at the centre of all human activities.

Gopinath was born on June 6, 1890 at Raha (Nowgong district) in a middle class home. His father, Budheswar Bardoloi was a doctor. Gopinath's mother died when he was quite young. He was however well looked after at home by his widowed sister, Sashi Kala Devi. He studied in the Cotton Collegiate School, Guwahati and passed his matriculation examination in 1907 in the first division. After his intermediate examination in 1909, he went to Calcutta and joined the Scottish Church College. He passed his B. A. honours degree in history. In 1914, he passed his M. A. in history securing the top position in the second class and simultaneously completed his law degree course.

During his student career, Gopinath, twice fell ill and was lucky to escape death. While in school, he suffered from kala-azar a deadly disease. In 1913, he was ill with typhoid, then an elusive disease for which no specific cure was available. Fortunately, he survived both.

When Bengal was partitioned, Bardoloi was a student of the Scottish Church College in Calcutta. He was against the idea of Assam being amalgamated with East Bengal. The anti-partition movement started by the Bengalis was, therefore, well received in Assamese circles in Calcutta. In 1900, Lord Curzon paid a visit to Guwahati. On March 13, the Assam leaders led by Jagannath Baruah presented him an address of the welcome raising therein the demand for the representation of the Assamese in the Imperial legislature. Assam was then a Chief Commissioner's province, having no provincial legislature. The Assam Association, an organisation which catered to the needs of the Assamese people, was always emphatic in its demand for maintaining the identity of Assam's territory and population. In the partition of Bengal, it saw a veritable danger. It said :

“The historic name of Assam will be obliterated forever, her language (will) suffer and removal of the seat of govern-

ment to a place outside Assam proper and further away from the geographical centre will necessarily make her lose the amount of care and attention which it (has) at present received from government....”

The Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha, a fraternal organisation of the Assam Association, too, opposed, “cutting up Bengal proper into two portions”, on the ground that “the people of both portions having been not only politically associated from the earliest historical times, but also not forming one people both by language and race.” Assam disliked the partition of Bengal firstly because it would divide the Bengalis and secondly because it would lead virtually to merger of Assam with the populous East Bengal.

However, partition was undone in 1912 and Assam got back her status of a Chief Commissioner’s province. The newly formed Legislative Council was deeply concerned about local issues. The members raised pertinent demands for more power to the Local Boards including the rights to elect the Chairman, to prohibit opium trade and to reduce the rate of grazing tax on cattle. But all these were cries in the wilderness. The British rulers were not willing to concede the Indian self-government and even refused to give Assam the status of a Governor’s province under the Montford Reforms. Men like Tarun Ram Phookan had thought that after the World War was over, the British Government would grant India a measure of self-government. But this hope was belied. Addressing the December session of the Assam Association in 1918 at Goalpara, as president, Phookan bitterly commented :

“If India is not fit for self-government even after a century and a half of British rule, who is responsible for this? It is the British rule which is to blame. The British officials who come from England to rule here know neither the langu-

age nor the manners and customs of the country and if they can rule well, why not educated Indians who know the country so well? Indians today are much better fitted for self-government than the Canadians when self-government was given to Canada.”

The mood of the Assam leaders was unmistakable. They were sore for Assam being not included in the proposed reforms scheme.

Gopinath Bardoloi observed the political scene carefully but he was still not active in politics. He wanted to be a professor of history. He tried for a lectureship in the only college in the Brahmaputra valley, but failed to get the job. This was a blessing in disguise, for, had he been a professor in the Government College, he might have lost his spirit of independence as he later confided to his friends. T. R. Phookan persuaded him to join the high school started at the west end of Guwahati, and he gladly accepted it. In 1917, he passed his final law examination and joined the Guwahati Bar. The legal profession gave him a measure of personal freedom he wanted in order to take part in public affairs.

In the same year he married Surbala, the only daughter of Bhumikanta Majinder Barua. When Surbala came to her husband's house, she was only 14 years old. Bardoloi was about 15 years older to her.

Surbala was brought up in a religious atmosphere. Her husband lived in a joint family, and she, as a docile daughter-in-law had to perform her customary duties to the superiors, donning her veil. Besides, she had to cook and serve food, and be at her loom or do her sewing work. Bardoloi gave her lessons in preparing his favourite dishes of *rau* fish and deer meat. He also taught her to darn shirts and blouses,

and prepare textile designs. Surbala had her first lessons in Hindi and English from Bardoloi.

Bardoloi always wore khadi, when he was in jail, Surbala used to prepare his dhoti and kurta from hand-spun yarn and send these to him. She also sent hand woven cloth for his distinguished colleagues and co-prisoners like Fakharuddin Ali Ahmed, who was to be the future President of the Indian Republic.

Bardoloi had two female elephants, Madanmala and Sundermala. He used to take them with him whenever he was out on hunting. He loved hunting wild fowl and deer. These elephants too loved him dearly. Whenever he was home, they used to come to the courtyard of his house from their resting place fresh from their bath and called him with the pet cry 'haut'. He would come out and offer them bananas and paddy. The family received a terrible shock when Madanmala died all of a sudden while she was one day taken out for hunting. Sundermala along with her baby was in continuous mourning for days. This made Bardoloi terribly depressed and he ultimately decided to sell the mother and her baby.

Surbala recalls how her husband used to celebrate the Bihu festival. The three Assamese Bihus, one in April and the other two in November and January, are essentially agricultural festivals. Both the Bohag (Baisakhi) and Magh Bihu, provide occasions for festivities. The Bohag Bihu is held in April and celebrated with folk dance, songs, music, sports and at-homes. It is a spring festival, celebrated before the sowing season. The Magh Bihu, which falls in mid-January, is the harvest home festival, the notable features of which are camp bonfires, community feasts, family dinners and buffalo fights. The Kati (Kartik) Bihu is less colourful and observed solemnly. The Ritual Sky lamps are lighted on raised posts

near the sacred basil plant. Every section of Assamese people takes part in it. Bardoloi too, like a typical Assamese, rejoiced in taking part in them. On the Magh Bihu night, which falls on Pous Sankranti day, the family used to hold bonfire of firewoods and feast by the fireside to which the children of the neighbourhood were invited. The invitees to the Bardoloi home included children of Harijans and tribals. He would arrange sports for them and sing Bihu songs with them. His love for the children was a marvellous trait in his character.

Bardoloi was a great lover of music. He could sing Bargeet, the serene Assamese Vaisnavite hymns, Brahma-sangeet, Rabindra-sangeet and gay Assamese Bihu songs. During leisure hours, usually on Saturday evenings, he loved to call his children to the courtyard and teach them to sing to the accompaniment of the organ which he played himself.

The late Hem Barua, who was a distinguished member of the Indian Parliament, noted how Gopinath entertained them with Bargeets during the leisure hours in the Jorhat Jail. During his tours in the villages, Bardoloi had to live far away from home. Songs then become dearer to him, a means of escape from the worldly life.

Bardoloi also tried his hand at writing poems. These poems however did not see the light of day. In one such poem, which he corrected several times, he wrote :

The curtain falls on the fleeting shadow
 The floral wreaths have withered
 In deep solitary gloom, I lost my way.
 You guided my way by the tune of your flute.
 My woodland is without a flower
 Hushed in the song of life
 My last Arti, a prayer of resignation
 will be at your feet...

The private poem has so many versions that it is difficult to reconstruct the text. In one passage he depicts his spiritual quest in which the path is to be lighted by flames brought to life by the Deepak raga. This unfinished poem reveals the tender side of his life, where arts found a home. In his writings, we often find references to classical literature, including Shakespearean dramas.

Bardoloi was a regular visitor to Bonda, a village situated 15 miles west of Guwahati, near a lake. The lake was an ideal place for fishing. A tribal boy named Huki, and two other aids usually accompanied him there. Huki seemed to be his most favourite aid. He took pleasure in teaching the three Rs to Huki.

He had a compassionate heart and was willing to come to the help of men in distress in whatever manner it was possible for him to do so. Once on a Mahalaya day, a beggar came to his house. Bardoloi was about to take his meal, when he noticed him. On inquiry he found that there was no food left in the kitchen for a fresh guest. Bardoloi immediately offered his meal to the beggar and remained near him till the latter finished his food. The spirit of compassion was his typical virtue. When he was the Chief Minister of Assam, he helped his Nepali milkman by lending him his car to carry his newly wed daughter to the bridegroom's house.

His letters from jail to his wife and other children also echoed this feeling of compassion. He wrote to his wife to accept a life of prayer and voluntary poverty to enable them to serve humanity in a better way. His deep faith in God and the prophets of the world made him a humble but determined man. The ethical basis of life, according to him, was God. In his letters to his children, he always used to write about prophets and their dedicated lives. This finally made

him accept Gandhiji as his leader in politics. But it was a difficult choice for a politician who also chose to be an administrator.

Hem Barua described him as a "Cricketer in Politics." In politics, he really displayed the highest spirits of sportsmanship. It is said that he used to read the sports page of the newspaper first.

Sir Saadullah, the ex-Prime Minister of Assam and the Muslim League Leader, was his formidable opponent who made a bid for capturing power in Assam during the 1946 elections. Bardoloi had deep respects for Sir Saadullah, who had been a teacher and later became an astute parliamentarian. One day, the two leaders accidentally met. Sir Saadullah told Gopinath that he was going to win an easy victory. Bardoloi too was confident of winning. They talked and parted like friends. When the results came out, Bardoloi's prediction was vindicated. The Congress Party won 59 seats out of 109. Bardoloi respected his opponents and in times of national crises always sought their help. That is why he could mobilise all sections of Assam's population during the anti-grouping movements.

Kaka Saheb Kalelkar who was a dear colleague of Bardoloi opined that Gopinath was an honest and sincere person. His devotion to duty was well known. Kakaji said that only an honest and sincere person would know how to value the extraordinary honesty and sincerity of Gandhiji. According to him Gopinath was loved by Gandhiji for this basic quality.

Call of the Freedom Movement

THE FREEDOM movement in Assam was a qualitative leap from the liberal programme of welfare and constitutional progress, started by the leaders of the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha and Assam Association, the two mouthpieces of the nascent Assamese middle class, to a vigorous national upsurge. By and large, the Assam Association formed a broad platform for all sections of the educated middle class—writers, lawyers, social workers, politicians and educationists. A delegation of the Assam Association attended the Calcutta Congress of 1920. Its secretary Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, on returning from Calcutta, decided to seek the support of its units for the freedom movement. The seventeenth session of the Association was held at Tezpur from December 26 to 28, 1920 under the presidentship of a public-spirited tea planter, Prasanna Kumar Barua. This conference endorsed the Congress resolution on non-cooperation saying that “the object of the Assam Association is to work for the attainment of swaraj by all legitimate means and to educate the people towards this object.” It was a momentous decision. The decision of the Nagpur Congress in December 1920 to set boundary limits and jurisdiction of the provincial Congress Committees and to reconstitute them on a linguistic basis was also of great significance. The Assamese leaders welcomed the proposal and saw in it the basis of the security of its sub-national identity.

Gopinath was a lawyer in Guwahati when Gandhiji came to the city in August, 1921. He was also a member of the Assam Association, and was well acquainted with the political and social movement in the country. The previous year he told one of his more sensitive colleagues, Amiya Kumar Das, (who wanted at that time to publish a series of biographies of great Indians and requested Bardoloi to write one) that he admired the Marathi judge and social reformer Ranade and would write a book on his life. However, Gandhiji's visit changed his plan. The call for action came.

In 1921, the movement threw out a unique leadership. The *trimurti*, which symbolised the movement, were Tarun Ram Phookan, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and Kuladhar Chaliha. Chandranath Sharma, the dynamic youth leader, symbolised the spirit of selfless action and militant activism. Others were playing second fiddle. Gopinath was one of them.

Soon the non-cooperation stir began. In the Guwahati Cotton College, the students went on a strike. To support the striking students, Chandranath raised a strike fund, to which Gopinath donated a sum of Rs. 250. He was still a practising lawyer. On May 2, 1921, he suspended his legal practice and took to organisational work. He became the joint secretary of the Guwahati Congress Committee. When Phookan and Nabin Chandra were arrested, Bardoloi became more active. He would go to the villages to carry out the programme of khadi mission. After the arrest of the leaders on November 30, 1921, a huge meeting was held at Guwahati to lodge popular protest with Kuladhar Chaliha in the chair. Bardoloi addressed the gathering alongwith other leaders and appealed to the people to enlist as volunteers for the newly constituted Assam National Volunteers Corps. The response was immediate and stupendous.

Bardoloi himself recalls how at that time he had to work

in the interior backward areas of Kamrup and Goalpara districts. It was an exhilarating experience. This mainly consisted in identifying oneself with the villagers. As the Assamese writer Benudhar Sarma points out, the educated non-cooperators soon became a class of new villagers, committed to a new rural awakening.

Gopinath found in Tarun Ram Phookan a genuine leader of eminence. In many ways, Phookan was unique. He was fearless and possessed unusual commonsense. He had the qualities of imaginative leadership. In one of his tours in the interior areas of Kamrup, Phookan, whose knowledge of Gandhism was profound, explained the technique of non-cooperation to a group of workers. He believed with Gandhiji that swaraj was possible to attain within one year provided the non-cooperation was absolute and the government servants joined the battle. If this action failed to persuade the British Government to yield swaraj, then there might be the necessity of mass civil disobedience which might invite self-sacrifice on a much bigger scale. The satyagrahis must be prepared for death even, Phookan explained. Bardoloi confessed that for the first time he got, from Phookan, a clear exposition of the idea of mass civil disobedience. Gradually, he was initiated into Gandhism.

Bardoloi was also associated with the move to open national school as part of the constructive programme envisaged by Gandhiji. Soon he became the headmaster of the national school started in Uzanbazar, Guwahati. Bardoloi's interest in educational and constructive work grew from this time onward. In later life, he was to be the chief architect of the first university in North East India and one of the moving spirits behind the constructive work programme in Assam.

In December 1921, Bardoloi had the second opportunity of meeting Gandhiji during the Ahmedabad session of the

Congress. The Mahatma advised him and other Assam delegates to widely publicise the speeches of Tarun Ram and Nabin Chandra delivered on the eve their arrests and carry the message of freedom into every cottage in Assam. Bardoloi and his fellow delegates were deeply impressed by the way the khadi work was being carried on in Gujarat. He told his colleagues that khadi was the key to the revival of Assam's rural economy.

“Assam's economy is not similar to the economy in other parts of India,” remarked Bardoloi. “In our villages, the people try to produce their necessary goods by their own labour. They do not work as daily labourers. The current practice is to weave a fabric by interlacing mill yarn in the warp with handmade fillings. But Mahatma Gandhi refused to acknowledge these fabrics as khadi. However, even full use of handmade yarn in the fabric alone will not meet Assam's needs. We need coloured, well-designed and varied textile to attract consumers. Unless we do that the use of khadi will remain confined only to a few Congressmen. In Ahmedabad, the tent roofs were made of khadi. We hope that the country will produce enough khadi in the coming ten years to replace foreign cloth.”

The delegates came back home inspired and determined to carry on the struggle with renewed vigour. On their way, they stopped at Delhi, the capital city of ancient and modern India. Bardoloi took the delegates round the city and showed them the ancient monuments and the works of grand Mughal and Hindu architecture. His sense of history revived and he dreamt of a free India.

When Bardoloi reached Guwahati, he was immediately put under arrest. Handcuffed and tied with a rope, he was whisked away from the city to the Tezpur jail, situated at a distance of 120 miles eastward. This was his first imprisonment and he served a full term of one year.

By this time, Bardoloi had already become a changed man. He had changed his way of life. During the period of his work in the villages of south Kamrup and Goalpara, he propagated the message of khadi by resorting to walking tours.

The work was unostentatious. He was not always in the limelight. The group activity clearly overshadowed the individual contribution. One such group activity was the boycott programme undertaken by the Guwahati public in 1920 against any public reception to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, then on a visit to the province. Bardoloi took a leading part in making the decision. This momentous decision in turn influenced the political attitude of the whole Assamese community.

After the Gaya Congress in 1922, the Swarajist party came to the forefront with its 'Council Entry' programme. The Congress Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee, consisting of Motilal Nehru, M. A. Ansari, V. J. Patel, C. Rajagopalachari and S. Kasturiranga Iyenger came to Assam in August 1922. After due enquiry, the committee came to the conclusion that the civil disobedience movement in its present form could no longer continue. However, C. Rajagopalachari spoke highly of the movement in Assam and had a special praise for the young men. He said :

“We had the privilege of meeting and hearing the views of some of the bravest and trusted of Gandhiji's followers, young men holding high the torch of faith, midst cruelty and devastation of illegality and unrestrained repression, strong and cheerful inspite of darkness and depression all around. If India had such youths of courage and faith serving the cause in all her provinces, there would be no doubt regarding the early attainment of the lofty goal.”

The Swarajists could not push ahead their Council Entry programme in the Gaya Congress, and soon formed a separate party to pursue this programme. In Assam Tarun Ram Phookan soon offered his whole-hearted support to the new party and took initiative in forming a branch in the province. On July 25, 1923, the provincial unit was formed with Phookan as its chairman, Rohini Kumar Chaudhury as the secretary and Gopinath Bardoloi as assistant secretary.

The Swarajist party, which had already resolved its conflicts with the non-cooperators within the Congress, soon contested elections and achieved remarkable victories. Gopinath actively took part in the campaign and addressed several meetings in support of its candidates.

The influence of Swarajists politics on Bardoloi continued for a long time, though he did not neglect constructive work. In 1926, the 41st session of the Congress was held in Pandu. The session was a feather in the cap of the constructive workers. The tents were made out of the hand-woven cloth prepared by workers in Assam. Moreover, the session was perhaps the least expensive of all the Congress sessions held till then. Bardoloi contributed his mite in making the session a resounding success.

In 1929, the Congress passed its famous Lahore resolution on Independence. The mood of the Congress then was to return to the warpath. Non-cooperation again became its battle-cry.

Phookan, Rohini Kumar Chaudhury and Gopinath Bardoloi were not happy about it. They issued a joint statement expressing their reservations about the council boycott programme and questioning its relevance in Assam. When the movement arrived, Phookan and Nabin Bardoloi were lukewarm towards it. At that time Gopinath was the president

of the Guwahati Congress Committee. Noting the differences between them and the non-cooperators, he soon resigned from his office. Bardoloi in a statement issued jointly with Rohini Kumar Chaudhury, opposed the Lahore programme of Council boycott and resigned. According to Bardoloi, the Congressmen should be in the Council to oppose governmental repressive measures, and keep alive the spirit of freedom. For Assam, this policy had a special relevance, as anti-freedom forces here were very strong and were backed by the foreign capital. Both Phookan and Bardoloi were emphatic on the point. Within a decade, the relevance of their stand was to become crystal clear. Even Mahatma Gandhi had to modify his stand somewhat in case of Assam.

Emerging As A Leader

BARDOLOI RESIGNED his presidentship of the Guwahati District Congress on February 27, 1930. In the same month, T. R. Phookan revived the Swarajist Party, after resigning from the Central Legislature in January following the Congress directive. Soon by-elections were held, and Phukan decided to contest from his old constituency as a non-Congress candidate. He won the election and was returned to the Central Legislature. The AICC retaliated by asking him and the elected members of the Provincial Assembly to resign from the AICC and APCC. Both Phookan and Rohini Chaudhury duly complied with it and went a bit further by resigning their primary membership. Gopinath did not contest the election, but he too resigned from the Congress.

The Assam Congress suffered a setback by these resignations, but the younger elements took up the challenge and developed a sort of collective leadership to carry on the civil disobedience programme. Bisnuram Medhi became the new President of the Assam Congress and the new Working Committee was formed with younger radicals like Sidhinath Sarma, Maulana Tyebulla and Ambikagiri Raychaudhury. Significantly enough, Gopinath Bardoloi was also offered membership in the Working Committee.

Bardoloi was always an admirer of T. R. Phookan; but he soon realised that isolation from the freedom movement was

not possible. He did not follow anybody blindly. Yet for various reasons, mainly policy considerations, Gopinath kept himself aloof for some time. He firmly believed in the Council Entry programme enunciated by Phookan. He along with Phookan, and Kuladhar Chaliha, while expressing their dissent, did not stand in the way of the satyagrahas that took place during the early thirties. In fact Gopinath Bardoloi was always a conscientious freedom worker at heart.

In 1932, he was elected the Chairman of the Guwahati Municipality. About this time, he became deeply involved in the activities of the newly revived Assam Association to popularise the demand for a separate High Court and University for Assam. The Congress in Assam was dominated by the activists. The ideological confusion of the period centred round moral and regional issues. The dominant idea in the minds of a section of Assam's politicians was Assam's future. Like T. R. Phookan, Bardoloi constantly advocated a mixed programme of contesting elections as well as carrying on the civil disobedience movement. None of the dissident leaders however, opposed the freedom movement. Gopinath Bardoloi in his biography of T. R. Phookan noted that Phookan had always been confident that even Mahatma Gandhi would have endorsed their stand on Council Entry in the peculiar situation of Assam.

The main argument Phookan used to advance in support of his Council Entry programme was the special demographic and socio-political situation in Assam. He was an ardent advocate of what he called 'rejuvenation of the Assamese sub-nationality.' This did not denote any major departure from the Congress policy, for the Congress accepted the principle of linguistic reorganisation of provinces. Their main grievance was that the Congress did not pay enough attention towards its implementation in Assam, specially in regard to preserva-

tion of the small nationality's identity of the Assamese. Unbridled immigration seemed to pose a problem to the state even then, and Phookan feared that the Assamese identity would be lost if timely steps were not taken to preserve it. Bardoloi too, felt that the Assamese identity had to be saved in the interest of the nation.

Whatever may be the reasons, it was a fact that Bardoloi did not come to the forefront in the 1930-33 movements, though he never disassociated himself completely from them. He was concerned with the estrangement of Phookan from the Congress workers in Assam. In those days, the Congress, as a national organisation could not pay due attention to purely local issues. These issues were : (1) establishment of a separate High Court and separate University for Assam; (ii) constitution of a homogeneous province, based on the Assamese language and territory by transferring the Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet to Bengal, and making such a province the base for Assam's rapid development. In a statement issued jointly to the press immediately after the Lahore Congress, Gopinath along with T. R. Phookan and Rohini Chaudhury did categorically assert this very point. They felt that Assam had some special problems, and to tackle those, a new and realistic approach was needed.

Evidently, Gopinath had some justification to keep himself temporarily aloof from the Congress mainstream. He, following T. R. Phookan, believed firmly in parliamentary politics. They always felt that unless some of them were in the Assembly, the special problems of Assam could not be effectively tackled. Besides the problems mentioned in the previous paragraph, Assam was faced with the problem of unfettered immigration from East Bengal. This assumed such a proportion that C. S. Mullan, the census superintendent of the 1931 census, was constrained to remark : "It is said but by no means improbable that in another 30 years

Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which the Assamese will find himself at home.”¹ He also said, “Wherever there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghis. In fact, the way they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam valley seems almost uncanny, without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam valley during the last 25 years.”² This certainly gave rise to misgivings in the Assamese mind that they would be reduced to an insignificant minority in their ancient homeland and would be a lost people. That this fear had a visible impact on the mind of such veteran nationalists as T. R. Phookan and Gopinath Bardoloi attests to its genuineness.

In 1934, Gandhiji came to Assam on his Harijan mission. During his stay at Guwahati, he visited the Harijan colony with Bardoloi. This visit enabled Bardoloi to realise the wretched conditions in which the Harijans lived. Later as the Chairman of the Guwahati Municipality, Bardoloi undertook certain measures to ameliorate their conditions. From then onwards, work for the uplift of Harijan became a passion with him. Soon after Gandhiji's visit, the Assam social workers set up an All Assam Harijan Sevak Sangha under the presidentship of His Holiness, the Sattradhikar of Garamur, Pitambar Deva Goswami, an ardent devotee of Sankardev, freedom fighter and zealous social reformer. Bardoloi used to help the organisation with men and money. Money was also made available to it from the Central Harijan Fund, collected by Gandhiji, but this often needed Bardoloi's persuasion.

Bardoloi was one of the architects of the Rastra Bhasa

1. Census of India 1931 Vol. III-Part I, Chapter III, p. 52

2. C. S. Mullan : Census of India 1931, Vol. III, Assam Part I Report, page 50

Prachar Samiti in Assam. With Gandhiji's help, he along with his other colleagues laid the basis of popular Hindi education in the province. It was an education imparted by trained local teachers for the benefit of the Assamese speaking population and hill tribes. He was the chairman of the Samiti for years and was its unfailing guide.

Till 1936, Bardoloi was engaged in constructive work. One unpleasant but principled decision he took during this period was to support the Congress candidate, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, against his mentor, T. R. Phookan, the Congress Nationalist Party candidate, in the election to the Central Legislative Assembly from Assam in 1934. Phookan's dissidence was conditional. He never dissociated himself from the Congress movement, but only from its selective decisions. He shared the basic swarajist faith that legislative work was as important as satyagraha.

Within a few years the congress itself decided to participate in the election campaign but was still indecisive about office acceptance. Phookan welcomed the changed attitude of the Congress, but insisted that it should decide to form the ministry. However the Congress did not agree with him. Bardoloi decided to contest the coming election as a Congress candidate. In the January hustings of 1937 Gopinath was returned to the Assam Legislative Assembly from South Guwahati Constituency. That year 33 out of 108 seats were captured by the Congress and it became the largest single party in the Assembly. On February 22, 1937, Gopinath Bardoloi was elected its leader, while Khirod Chandra Deb of Sylhet became his deputy, and Shri Deveswar Sarma, the chief whip of the party. Basanta Das became the speaker of the Assembly. Because of the Congress policy of non-acceptance of office, the legislature party did not make any attempt at forming the government. However, within four months, the Congress changed its decision

and favoured acceptance of the Ministry at the provincial level, at least in those provinces where the party was in majority.

At that time, Sir Muhammad Saadullah was then the Prime Minister of Assam, and Gopinath, the leader of the opposition. In the first budget session, Gopinath criticised the Government for placing a 'wretched' budget which made provisions for the maintenance of an army of occupation, an expensive bureaucracy, a state of acute economic exploitation by foreign capitalists and for keeping Assam economically backward and her people morally degraded. He further threatened that "the Congress wants to reject the Federal Constitution and will not allow it to function." Bardoloi spoke like a rebel in accordance with the programme chalked out by the Congress legislature party. The programme, which was an echo of the AICC ideals, was ambitious and contained the following specific items: (i) persistent attempt to wreck the Constitution from within; (ii) to do away with the repressive laws; (iii) to reduce the pay of Ministers and the Speakers to Rs. 1000 or less; (iv) to endeavour to abolish the second chamber; (v) to agitate for transfer of Sylhet and Cachar excluding the hill areas of North Cachar to Bengal; (vi) reduction of land revenue; (vii) abolition of opium trade and its use except on medical ground; (viii) amendment of all local self-government Acts; (ix) introduction of compulsory primary education and (x) removal of the indebtedness and other distresses of the peasants.

The Congress party found that it would not be easily allowed to form the Ministry, though it was the single largest group in the Assembly. The Governor of Assam preferred Sir Saadullah, because of his rapport with the European group in the Assembly. The Saadullah Ministry took office on April 1, 1937. It was the inaugural day of the 1935

Constitution and the Congress party observed it as a protest day. "The white bureaucracy speak through their brown successors", complained the Congress legislator, Dakshinaranjan Gupta Choudhury in the Assembly on August 10 and said, "The new Constitution was inaugurated on All Fools Day, I mean the 1st of April, and the country has been befooled."

The Saadullah Ministry had a bare working majority and its policies were not pro-people. The government met with eleven defeats in the first 20 days (from August 12 to 31, 1937). The first defeat came when Abdul Matin Chaudhury's Local Rates Amendment Bill providing reduced local taxes was passed by 67 to 37 votes. The defeat on August 17 occurred when the House refused to pass the demand for grant of Rs. 78,446 for maintaining the establishment of two Commissioners in the valleys. The government was compelled to accept the cut as the Government of India Act 1935, made no provision for restoration of the grant. This led to a serious constitutional crisis, and the Speaker, B.K. Das, invited the Advocate General's opinion. On the basis of the Advocate General's comments, the Speaker held that the refusal of grant was perfectly legal and binding on the government. Saadullah presented a supplementary demand for Commissioners' establishments after assuring the House that he would put an end to the Commissioners' establishment in the Surma Valley from January 1, 1938. The demand was carried. But soon the Premier went back on his assurance and on December 21, 1937 the Governor sent a message demanding supplementary grants from January 1, 1937 to March 31, 1938. The Speaker refused to admit the Supplementary and the Governor, acting in the name of his special powers nullified the Speaker's ruling. This interference of the Governor was contrary to the assurance given by the Viceroy to the Congress on June 21, 1937.

The Saadullah Government suffered its eighth defeat on August 21, when its demand for grants for temporary intelligence staff was rejected. After this, Sir Saadullah changed his tactics, and in order to procure solid support of the Muslim members of the House joined the Muslim League and attended its conference in Lucknow during October. He resigned and reconstituted his cabinet on February 5, 1938. It had the support of 58 members in the House. Saadullah improved his performance for a while, but his opponents accused him of personal ambition and non-performance.

But his policies were unpopular and his tactics less principled. Even his supporters began to desert him. On September 12, 1938, several motions were moved against the Ministry unaccompanied by any speech. Fifty-one members supported these motions. Faced with prospects of defeat, the Saadullah Ministry submitted its resignation on September 13, 1938.

The Congress party was short of a majority in the House. It needed two members more to attain that status. But it was the single largest party in the Assembly. Bardoloi was invited by the Governor to form the Ministry. The formation of a coalition Ministry which would accept the national programme of the Congress was not easy. The first objection was moral, and it was raised by no less a person than Maulana Azad, a powerful member of the Congress Parliamentary Board. Secondly, Bardoloi had to overcome the European group's opposition towards the Congress. It had all the resources at its command to win over a possible Congress ally. Thirdly, it was not easy to weld the heterogeneous political elements into a unified and cohesive force.

Yet luck favoured Bardoloi. Despite Azad's objections, Subhash Chandra Bose, the then Congress President sided with

the Assam Congress leaders who were quite emphatic that the people in Assam wanted an alternative government to come to power. Maulana Tyebulla, the Assam Congress leader, observed that Bose was convinced that a Congress coalition Ministry in Assam was a political necessity and was persuasive enough to convince others. Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel too were sympathetic to the move.

The happiest man was, however, T.R. Phookan, who knew that what he had foreseen earlier had come true, and that the Congress at last accepted his thesis that office acceptance was not necessarily a hinderance to freedom. He helped Bardoloi, his old comrade, in every way to make the coalition experiment a success. Bardoloi called on the Governor on September 18, 1938, and submitted a list of five Ministers. The Governor immediately approved the list. A gazette extraordinary was issued on September 19, 1938 to announce the formation of the first coalition Ministry.

But Bardoloi was yet to prove his majority in the Assembly. Sir Saadullah made a premature effort to bring down the Ministry even before it had taken oath by attempting to move a motion of no-confidence. Fortunately the Speaker rejected it. On September 19, Bardoloi announced the formation of the coalition Ministry and after the announcement, the Speaker adjourned the House *sine die*. The Minister-designates then went to the Constitutional Hall to take oath; unfortunately there they came to learn about an abrupt postponement of the ceremony by the Governor. This was interpreted as a partisan and unethical act. However, soon the Governor reversed his decision and on September 20, the Bardoloi Ministry was sworn in.

The first five Ministers in the Bardoloi Ministry were Gopinath Bardoloi (Prime Minister, Home and Education), Akshyay Kumar Das (Excise and Agriculture), Ramnath Das

(Medical and Public Health), Kamini Kumar Sen (Legislative, Local Self-Government, Judiciary and General Department), and Rupnath Brahma (Forest and Registration). A month later, three Muslim Ministers joined the cabinet. They were : Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, (Finance and Revenue), Muhammad Ali (Cooperation and Industry), and Ali Hyder Khan (Public Works).

Good Government and Liberty

BARDOLOI PROVED to be a capable administrator and a shrewd politician. During the fourteen months he was in power, he had no difficulty in getting majority support for his 33-member group in a House of 108 legislators. He could easily win the support of the tribal people and the progressive sections of the Muslims and scheduled castes. His was the first popular government in Assam with a secular democratic outlook and deeply committed to the welfare of the people. I, the author was at school when the Bardoloi Ministry came to power. I saw how people welcomed Gopinath and his colleagues as their own men even in the remotest villages.

The opposition in the Assam Legislative Assembly was never a well-knit group. It was an opportunist combination of communal, imperialist and vested interests. It always tried to block the passage of progressive legislations introduced by the Ministry and tabled no-confidence motions several times with a view to dislodging it. Happily all its attempts failed and the Ministry survived.

On the whole, the Bardoloi Ministry kept its election pledges. An enactment was passed to prohibit the opium trade. The Finance Minister, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, introduced his Agricultural Income Tax Bill and got it passed in due course despite vehement opposition from the European members. The Act envisaged a tax on the profits of the tea industry and

became very unpopular with the Europeans who represented it in the Legislature. The Act benefited the exchequer by about Rs. 40 lakhs during the extant financial year.

Taxing the rich was finally matched by reduction of taxes on the poor. The Ministry reduced land revenue to the extent of 50 per cent on smaller holdings and 20 to 30 per cent on bigger holdings. This gave the needed relief to the poor peasants, who were burdened with debts and faced with forced sale of lands. The Bardoloi cabinet also set an example of austere living by reducing the salary of Ministers to Rs. 500. The Ministry also started measures to reform jail administration and to ensure faster growth of the cottage industries.

Fourteen months are too short a period to initiate significant measures of reform, but the above mentioned measures were enough to prove that the government was sincere in its desire to work for the people.

However, the Ministry was faced with two complicated problems. One was the encroachment on wastelands and reserve forests by immigrants from the populous East Bengal. And the other was the famous oil workers' strike at Digboi.

Sir Saadullah, as the Prime Minister of Assam, had supported the policy of settling the East Bengal immigrants in Assam. The unrestricted immigration created new economic and cultural problems for the tribal and non-tribal people alike. There was popular resentment. The Line System, which sought to restrict the settlement of immigrants in certain selected localities, failed to achieve its purpose. The Hockenhull Line System Enquiry Committee Report revealed that while the Assamese opinion generally favoured the restrictions on land settlement with immigrants, the immigrants strongly advocated their removal. The Bardoloi cabinet carefully studied the

situation, and on the eve of its relinquishing office on November 16, 1939, it issued a notification embodying its decision on the Hockenhull Report. The decision prohibited settlement of land to persons who came to the province after January 1, 1938.¹ (This decision was not implemented by the Saadullah Government that succeeded it). The indigenous tribal population particularly insisted that the restrictive measures should continue and guarantee non-alienation of tribal lands. Bardoloi responded generously and created a number of tribal belts in order to protect tribal lands from encroachment. Bardoloi also pursued a policy of protecting the grazing reserves and reserved forests in order to preserve the valuable forest resources of the province.²

The Digboi oil workers' strike, which started on April 3, 1939 with some specific demands including recognition of the labour union, entered into a critical phase on April 18 when three labourers were shot dead by some hostile elements. The event stirred the conscience of the nation and no less a person than M.N. Roy hailed it as another step towards real freedom. The government ordered a magisterial inquiry into the firing, but its report when published was deemed by the public to

1. *Political History of Assam* Vol. III; p. 207

2. The land resolution passed by the Bardoloi cabinet on November 10, 1939 was as follows :

- (i) Land settlement would be forbidden to all persons in village grazing reserves and professional grazing reserves.
- (ii) It was proposed to provide land to the landless people to a total holding of 30 bighas in the regular settlement areas.
- (iii) The Government would give protection to tribal and backward classes. Tribal block in sub-montane region would be wholly prohibited and all immigrant residing there would be evicted. (Assam Gazette, Nov. 4, 1939).

be incomplete and partial. The government was persuaded to appoint another one-man enquiry body manned by Manmath Nath Mukherjee, the retired Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court. The Commission could not start its work. The Bardoloi Government further appointed a Board of Conciliation with K. K. Hazra, a District and Sessions Judge, as its chairman. The Board submitted its report on August 8, 1939. It recommended reinstatement of all strikers who had been discharged. But the Digboi Oil Company's attitude was non-cooperative from the very beginning. Soon, the world war intervened and the Bardoloi Ministry resigned on political ground. The Governor of Assam declared Digboi a protected area under the Defence of India Rules, making it impossible for the labourers even to carry on constitutional agitation.

The Bardoloi cabinet also instituted a Tea Labour Conditions Enquiry Committee to investigate into the working conditions in the Assam tea gardens. Besides being deprived of living wages and good conditions of work, the tea labourers did not enjoy any civil liberty. The Enquiry Committee, however, could not complete its work due to the non-cooperation of the European managers of the tea gardens.

Despite all these, the Bardoloi Government succeeded in winning the support of various sections of the people. But it had to resign following the directive of the Congress Working Committee on October 23, 1939 to do so in protest against the arbitrary action of the British Government and the Viceroy in declaring India as one of the belligerent countries without her consent. Bardoloi was also unhappy with the Governor, who took unilateral measures in promulgating ordinances without referring them to him. Leaders like Subhash Chandra Bose felt that Assam had a special case. Bose persuaded the Mahatma to endorse his stand. It was feared that unless a secular government was in power in the province, the communal forces would grow unabated. The Mahatma said,

“Assam should not come out of the government if it did not feel like it.” Maulana Azad however, felt that “exception should not be made in the case of Assam”. To this Gandhi did not agree. The APCC discussed the issue on November 7, 1939, but ultimately decided in favour of resignation. Following a meeting of the legislature party, Bardoloi submitted his resignation formally on November 15. The Governor accepted the resignation two days later.

The non-Congress members of the coalition party now hit upon an alternative strategy. They initiated a move to form a ministry with the support of the Congress legislators to forestall the possibility of the installation of a ministry dominated by communal elements. The Congress High Command was lukewarm to the move, and as a result, the path for formation of a new ministry headed by Sir Saadullah was almost clear. Sir Saadullah did not have the requisite majority, but the Governor hastened to saddle him in power. Had he been fair, he would have called the leader of the non-Congress members of the Congress coalition party to form the ministry. The intention was clear. The Government's first concern was to raise money for war funds.

The Congress soon embarked on an individual satyagraha campaign to create public opinion against the imperialist war. Bardoloi now enthusiastically took up the satyagraha training programme. He addressed public meetings in villages and asked the people to get ready for it. On November 26, 1940 Bardoloi left for Wardha and met Gandhiji. As was his wont, Gandhiji made a very ingenious suggestion. He asked the Assam legislators to choose between working in the legislature or offer satyagraha. He felt that the Assam situation needed special attention. Bardoloi, however, opted for satyagraha. Gandhiji then approved the names of 22 satyagrahis out of the 26 in the list submitted by Bardoloi.

Bardoloi came back and offered satyagraha on December 11, 1940 at the Deputy Commissioner's Court in Guwahati before a crowd of 10,000 people, including students and youths. He was arrested and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. He was released on June 18, 1941 on health grounds. After his release, Bardoloi found that there had been an eclipse of civil liberties all around. The Indian Press Act of 1910 was being applied even to seize leaflets and pamphlets. A press at Barpeta was confiscated under the DIR for printing anti-war leaflets. At Sylhet, permission was refused to hold a meeting to condole the death of the Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore.

On July 28, 1941, Sir Saadullah announced his Land Development Scheme, which envisaged opening up of fresh areas including reserve forests and waste lands to immigrants and illegal squatters. As a result of this, there was persistent public demand for resumption of parliamentary activities by the Congress. Bardoloi went to Wardha on November 15, 1941 to discuss the issue with Gandhiji and the Congress High Command. Despite his contrary views, he was asked to resume parliamentary activities. The majority of the Assam Congress legislators were in favour of returning to the legislature. The High Command now cleared the decks.

They attended the winter session of the Assembly. Soon an opportunity for launching a strategic attack on the government presented itself before the party. The students of Guwahati were restive over the war fund raising issue. A science exhibition held in the Cotton College to raise fund was boycotted by the students and the public. A student was manhandled by an organiser of the exhibition. This led to the total boycott of classes by the Guwahati students on December 6, 1941. Later a huge procession was taken out in the town. There was a heavy lathi charge on the processionists in the Coolie Depot Road, as a result of which 240 young

men and women were injured, 40 of them seriously. As a participant in that procession the author remembers how barbarous and merciless those beatings were. The authorities got panicky, and closed the schools and colleges for three weeks, Guwahati observed hartal on December 7 and the next day agitating students, shouting slogans, arrived at the gate of the Assembly in Shillong. Gopinath, along with other leaders arrived at the gate and pacified the boys by promising them to raise the issue at the House. Bardoloi acted as he had promised, but Sir Saadullah refused to accept the demands of the students for the removal of the Deputy Commissioner, who was responsible for the lathi charge. This led to tension in Saadullah's own party and the Education Minister, Rohini Kumar Chaudhury, submitted his resignation as a protest.

Soon Chaudhury made a bid for forming an alternative government with Congress support. Bardoloi succeeded in persuading the APCC and the Congress Parliamentary Board to put their seal of approval on the coalition. On December 22, 1939, he issued a statement outlining the terms of the coalition : (i) The Congress Legislature group would function as an independent unit ; (ii) it would not hold any ministerial portfolio ; (iii) it would not oppose the formation of the Government ; and (iv) it would expect the Chaudhury cabinet to follow the Congress party's legislative programme.

When the Saadullah Ministry finally resigned on December 12, 1941, Chaudhury laid his claim to form another Ministry. But the Governor rejected his claim and took over the administration of the province into his own hands under section 93 of the Government of India Act.

Soon, the war situation in South East Asia turned worse for the Allies. The Japanese made rapid advance to Singapore, which fell on February 12, 1942. Rangoon and the Andamans fell on March 7 and March 12 respectively. Lakhs of refugees

fled from South East Asia to India via Assam. The British administration was in panic. The Governor of Assam made a desperate bid to mobilise local public opinion in favour of the war by scrapping the Land Development Scheme initiated by Sir Saadullah on March 6, 1941.¹ But the political understanding between the people and the government was lacking on the issue of independence and as a result, his attempt failed.

The British Government sent Sir Stafford Cripps on March 23, 1942 to arrive at a political understanding with the Indian people, but his mission too failed. Assam was virtually turned into a battlefield. A large number of war evacuees from Burma and Malaya arrived at the province in the most wretched conditions. Bardoloi along with other Congress workers became involved in serving the evacuees and organising *santi senas* for this purpose.

The AICC met in Bombay on August 7 to discuss the issues of war and freedom. The resolution passed by it on August 8 called for immediate transfer of power to Indian hands. The resolution, while keeping the doors of negotiations open, firmly asserted that the alternative to transfer of power was a non-violent rebellion to be led by Gandhiji. From Assam, Bardoloi and Siddhinath Sarma attended the session.

1. *Political History of Assam, Vol. III (1940-7), p. 45*

Editors : Arun Chandra Bhuyan, S. Gopala De (Govt. of Assam Publication). The Governor stated that "there is not enough wastelands fit for settlement to accommodate all those who are in search of land, without seriously prejudicing the interests not only of the indigenous population but also of those who have already come from Bengal & settled in the last twenty or thirty years and that consideration must condition any arrangement that are made for settling lands." The emphasis was laid on extending forest areas and preserving grazing reserves.

The government did not wait for negotiations to start. Instead, it struck hard at the Congress. On August 9, 1942, Gandhiji and the prominent Congress leaders were put under detention and the organisation was declared unlawful under section 16 of the Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1908. The Assam Government had planned ahead on August 5 to arrest the local Congress leaders. Accordingly Bardoloi and Sarma were put under arrest at Dhubri, while they were returning to Guwahati from Bombay by train. Gopinath was taken to the Jorhat jail, where his other Congress colleagues were detained. While the leaderless masses organised under *santi senas* and *mrityu-bahini* were engaged in a life and death struggle against imperialism, Bardoloi and the other provincial leaders passed their days in deep agony, watching the events outside with patriotic concern and planning for the future. One of his colleagues in jail, Shri Deveswar Sarma, in his recently published autobiography, narrates how they passed their time in animated discussions about the problems of the country and the future administration in free India. These discussions reveal that Bardoloi was a convinced Gandhian. He was concerned not only with the future of Assam and its multiracial society, but also with the future of civilisation. He was constantly engaged in reading and writing. Some of his writings were later published in book form. They testify to his deep religious nature.

In jail, Bardoloi met quite a few of the popular heroes of the 1942 rebellion. One of them was Kushal Konwar, who was sentenced to death because of his supposed involvement in the Sarupathar train derailment case. He was the secretary of the Sarupathar Congress Committee and a deep devotee of the Gita. Bardoloi was convinced that Kushal Konwar was wrongly implicated in the sabotage case and was judicially murdered. Bardoloi and his colleagues went to Kushal's cell to bid the final farewell to him on the eve of his execution on June 15, 1943. Kushal was calm and smiling. He was

prepared to meet death and needed no consolation. He asked his callers to carry on the fight for freedom till victory and added that he was chosen by God to become a martyr for a cause which was dear to them all. Bardoloi was overwhelmed and realised he was face to face with a true hero that men usually found in sublime epics.

Another freedom fighter, a Mishing tribal hero, showed the same quiet courage in facing death. He was seriously ill, and the government wanted to release him on parole. His self dignity was aroused and he preferred death in custody as a free man to writing an undertaking not to take part in the movement. He chose slow death within jail. That man was Kamala Miri of Golaghat, an illiterate peasant who learnt his three Rs from Bardoloi. Bardoloi had acted as his tutor in jail.

Battle for Survival

IN JAIL, Bardoloi suffered from eye trouble and high blood pressure. The government released him on health ground on January 26, 1944, but he was kept interned in the city of Guwahati. However, he was allowed to go to Calcutta for treatment provided he refrained from being involved in political activities.

After his return from Calcutta, Bardoloi had to remain interned in Guwahati. He found the situation outside jail very disturbing. The Allied Army stationed in Assam and Manipur recovered from their initial shock of humiliating defeat and was on the offensive on the Imphal front. The 1942 rebellion in Assam, an operational area of the Allied Army, cost Assam heavily. The Congress Committee and *santi senas* were illegal, civil liberties were non-existent, and special ordinances like Penalties (Enhancement) Ordinance, 1942, the Special Criminal Courts Ordinance, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Ordinance 1942, subversive Activities Ordinances 1943 and Defence of India Rules were in force. All those measures had been used to suppress the popular uprising. Out of a total of 3531 persons arrested till December 31, 1943, 1679 were convicted. The number of those prosecuted under DIR ran upto 3,364, out of which 2,448 persons were convicted. The total number of detention cases was 403. According to

the government 22 persons lost their lives as a result of police firings and 4 received death sentences. Of the four convicted with death penalty, three were later on granted pardon. The total amount of collective fines imposed was Rs. 4,24,661 out of which Rs. 2,94,727 were realised.

Immediately after the arrests of Congress MLAs in 1942 the Governor of Assam, Sir Robert Reid, revoked the Sec. 93, and called Sir Saadullah back to power. The new Ministry was installed on August 25, 1942. The Ministry renewed its policy of support to war efforts and became an instrument of suppression of the August movement. In addition, it revoked the order of the Governor scrapping the Land Development Scheme passed on March 6, 1941, and reverted to its old policy of throwing open grazing and forest reserves to immigrants from East Bengal, which led to clashes between the graziers and the immigrants.

The public were agitated over both these issues. Bardoloi felt that both the imperialists and the communalists were acting concertedly to suppress the secular democratic forces. The communal elements, in addition, were pursuing a policy of division of India on religious basis. The Muslim League, to which some members of the Saadullah Cabinet were affiliated, made a determined attempt to include Assam in their proposed Pakistan. Bardoloi, in consultation with his colleagues, decided to revive constitutional politics and constructive work together. His strategy was flawless. He knew that communalism and imperialism could no longer be fought on the agitational front alone. The harassed people have to be spiritually revived through constructive work and the alliance between the communalists and the imperialists broken through vigorous legislative action.

Bardoloi got a comprehensive report prepared on the Assam situation by some of his released colleagues and sent it

to Gandhiji for study and advice. The messengers were two veteran Congress workers, Mahendra Mohan Chaudhury and Akhyaya Kumar Das. Gandhiji had been released from detention on May 5, 1944. The messengers met him in Panchgani and then in Wardha. After reading the report, Gandhi advised the people of Assam to cultivate fearlessness. In answer to a query on the Muslim League's attempt to change the population-structure of Assam through a policy of unbridled immigration from East Bengal, Gandhiji replied categorically that such unrestricted migration to a small province should not continue.¹ He further opined that in the event of a possibility that due to such migration the local population were likely to be reduced to a minority, the people had a right to resort to satyagraha. He however made it plain that the issue should not be given a communal colour. The other query was regarding the policy of non-violence. In Assam, some underground workers led by Sankar Barua advised the women to resist military and police atrocities, if necessary, with swords. This raised a moral issue. Gandhiji replied that non-violence was, for the brave, a very potent weapon. Those who could not wield this matchless weapon were free

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1. *Gopinath Bardoloi*, pp. 129-130, an anthology published by Assam Publication Board. *The Political History of Assam* (Vol. III, p. 262) notes how the Saadullah Ministry allotted 1 lakh *bighas* of land in Assam valley for settlement of immigrants from East Bengal in the period between 1939-41. "The magnitude of this influx was so serious that between the years 1911 and 1941 there was a conspicuous increase in the Muslim population in the Assam Valley districts (including Garo Hills) as shown below :

<i>Year</i>	<i>Muslim Population</i>
1911	3,55,320
1921	5,85,943
1931	9,43,352
1941	13,03,9620

to use traditional weapons in defence of their honour or dignity.

Gandhiji invited Bardoloi to come and stay with him to recoup his health. But he could not go. However Bardoloi used to visit Sevagram frequently. In one of his visits to Wardha, he found that Gandhiji was observing silence. So he put some written questions to him. To these, he got written answers. Bardoloi's questions revealed one dilemma in his mind. He was unable to decide whether as *satyagrahi*, he should attend the Assembly or not. "I have read your thing carefully. I am myself in doubt," replied Gandhiji "But on the whole my personal opinion is that if I am a member, I should go and attend. Assam is the most peculiar case. What may apply to Bombay ought not to be made applicable to Assam. Hence I say quite seriously, act as the dictate of your heart tells you. If by coming to Sevagram you discover your heart, the visit will have been worthwhile. It will not be so even if you take a readymade opinion from me. It may flatter my vanity, but not serve you." To a further query, Gandhi said, "I tell you, if you are a leader, act as a leader and not as my follower."

Bardoloi also told Gandhiji that some constructive workers wanted to build a centre in the name of Kasturba in Assam. "Why should they wait if they have an action in mind?" Gandhi asked. "Let them give the lead. Forty is a good number. They can do education work, maternity work, sanitation, etc."

Bardoloi's mind was finally made up. With thirteen of his released colleagues he attended the November session of the Assam Assembly. On November 14, 1944, he delivered a hard-hit speech in defence of civil liberties. "We reappear as a party to continue the fight from inside the Legislature," he said. "However thinned our ranks might be and however feeble our voice, it will continue to be raised against this evil,

which has brought in its wake so much misery to us We shall work for the elementary liberties of human beings, which in the name of the War has been practically nullified. I mean the liberty of free association, the liberty of speech and the liberty of the Press.”

In March 1945, the Congress strength in the Assembly was increased to 18. Sir Saadullah's Government became unstable due to dissensions within the ruling party. On the other hand, the Congress party's popularity was at its height. So Sir Saadullah changed his tactics to keep himself in saddle. He made a pact with Bardoloi, the terms of which were as follows : (a) two-thirds of the security prisoners detained in jail would be released before April 30, 1945; (b) convicted political prisoners would be released as early as possible and cases of prisoners sentenced for sabotage would be reviewed; (c) ban on meetings, processions and rallies would be lifted in view of the coming local bodies and Assembly elections; (d) all restriction orders on the Congress MLAs and political prisoners would be removed except in the case of those who were engaged in underground activities ; and (e) the Land Development Scheme would be scrapped and the Revenue Department would be placed in the hands of the veteran Assamese leader, Rohini Kumar Chaudhury.

The agreement was a tactical victory for Bardoloi, for it would restore civil liberties in Assam, which was essential for carrying out constructive work and for mobilising public opinion for the elections.

Sir Saadullah kept his word. His policies towards the 1942 movement and the East Bengal immigrants had been very unpopular, and he wanted Congress support to keep himself in saddle. Many Congressmen opposed the whole agreement, as it involved a question of principle. Bardoloi, therefore, sent Mahendra Mohan Chaudhury to meet Gandhiji and get his

opinion on the subject. Gandhiji treated the Assam case as an exception and wrote to him to act as he thought fit.

The Saadullah Ministry resigned on March 23, 1945 only to resume office again with tacit Congress support. On May 31, 1945, the government lifted the ban on Assam Congress. But its resolution on land policy adopted on January 16, 1945 following a decision made at an All Parties meeting became a bone of contention. The resolution conceded the Bardoloi Ministry's earlier decision that the government would only settle those landless immigrants that had come before 1938. It provided for keeping the professional grazing reserves intact and promised to give special protection to the tribal people. But the government could not implement the resolution in the right spirit. The Muslim League opposed the resolution wholesale. The Congress found that it gave such discretionary powers to local officials that settlement of lands with immigrants could hardly be prevented. Bardoloi had to constantly review his position in regard to the Ministry. He had another consultation with Gandhiji on the subject and found that Gandhiji's opinion concurred with his own.

Meanwhile the Government of India announced its decision to hold general elections on August 21, 1945. The Congress decided to contest the elections. Bardoloi was a special invitee to the Congress Working Committee (held in Pune in September) which took this decision. The Assam Assembly was dissolved on October 1, 1945 and the general elections took place on January 9, 1946. In this elections, the Congress and the Muslim League were the main contestants. The Congress under Bardoloi's leadership won a big victory this time. It secured the support of 61 members in a House of 103. On February 11, 1946, the new Bardoloi cabinet assumed office in Shillong. The Muslim League, however, got the majority of Muslim seats. The objective of the Muslim League at that time could be clearly seen from the statement made by H. S. Suhrawardy,

Secretary of the Muslim League Parliamentary Board, at a public meeting : "The Muslims of Bengal have awakened from their slumber and are determined to achieve Pakistan in alliance with our brothers in Assam."

The new Bardoloi Cabinet consisted of nine members including Bisnuram Medhi, J. J. M. Nichols Roy, Baidyanath Mukherjee, Ramnath Das, Bhimbar Deuri, Abdul Matlib Majumdar and Abdur Rashid.¹ The Ministry took power at a crucial moment of Indian history. The Labour Government in Britain decided to send a Cabinet Mission to explore the possibility of drafting a future constitution for India in consultation with the Viceroy and Indian political leaders. The Mission reached India on March 23, 1946 and began discussion with the Indian leaders. According to its plan, the Union of India would consist of both British India and the Indian states. It arbitrarily divided British India into three sections. Assam and Bengal were to be included in Group 'C' while Group 'B' was to comprise the Punjab, Sind, the North West Frontier Province and British Baluchistan. The rest of the provinces were to form Group 'A'.

Side by side, the constitution-making process also was to be started. According to the plan, the provincial legislatures would elect members to the Constituent Assembly. The Constituent Assembly would be divided into three sections and each section would draft the constitution of each group separately.

1. *Political History of Assam*, Vol. III, p. 335 'Bardoloi ventured at this moment to take two Muslims from the Muslim League and approached Saadullah to nominate them. Bardoloi justified this move saying that Muslims had about thirty-four lakhs of population in the province. And that League Ministry under Saadullah had included two members in the Cabinet of Congress Nomination. But as soon as the news leaked out, it received an adverse public opinion and Bardoloi had to retrace his steps.' Maulana Azad however commended Bardoloi's action.

Later on, these section constitutions would be integrated and the constitution of the Union of India would be drafted. The plan did not seem to deny a province the right to come out of one section and join another.

Before announcing their plan on May 16, 1946, the Cabinet Mission had a thorough discussion with the Congress and the Muslim League leaders. On April 1, 1946, Bardoloi had an interview with the Mission. He made a forceful plea before it for retaining Assam as a province. He pointed out that it was already a province formed on linguistic and cultural basis, enjoying provincial autonomy. It should be allowed to continue, he pleaded, in the future set-up as a full fledged unit. He favoured separation of Sylhet from Assam and rejected Jinnah's demand for Pakistan as absolutely preposterous. Sir Saadullah also deposed before the Mission and suggested that the whole province might be attached to Bengal. The Cabinet Mission stuck to its plan of forming groups.

The Assam Congress reacted sharply. The Working Committee dispatched a message to Abul Kalam Azad, the President of the Congress, intimating its strong disapproval of and opposition to the Grouping Clause, Bardoloi, who was in Delhi, pointed out to the Congress leaders the mutually contradictory views expressed in the state paper. While the clause 15 (5) stated that "Provinces should be free to form groups", the clause 19 (iv) and (v) made the grouping compulsory for the provinces.¹ Bardoloi's fear about compulsory grouping was confirmed by Cabinet Mission's statement on the question. Lord Pethick Lawrence said, "The provinces automatically came into sections A, B and C which are set out in the statement." That meant that Assam and Bengal would draft the group constitution together, and the constitution would be more or less binding on Assam. The right to opt out after the

1. *Political History of Assam*, Vol. III, p. 346

constitution had been drafted by a majority vote would be virtually impossible, for in the section Assam would have only 10 members compared to Bengal's 60.

Bardoloi submitted a detailed memorandum to the Congress Working Committee in which he stated :

“If the Working Committee do not stand up to safeguard them against the operations of these sinister proposals then Assam and her people will be compelled to think that the Working Committee in their anxiety to think of larger provinces have given this small province a go by. It will not be a surprise if many in Assam will consider it to be a great betrayal.”

The Working Committee in its resolution of May 24, 1946 interpreted the paragraph 15 in its own way and stated, “The respective provinces shall make their choice whether or not to belong to the section in which they are placed.” The Cabinet Mission did not agree with this interpretation. It asserted that grouping was an “essential feature of the scheme” that it could only be modified by agreement between the parties. It made clear that opting out after the constitution had been adopted would be a major issue in which all eligible voters in the group would have a say. The interpretation favoured the League.

Bardoloi was not sure that the Congress Working Committee would be persistent in its demand for a liberal interpretation of the clause. He declared on May 19 that Assam would stand by its right to provincial autonomy granted under the Act of 1933. The *Statesman* criticised the stand saying that it satisfied nobody. Bardoloi then felt that both the press and the politicians might fail Assam at the critical juncture. He had ample confidence in the national leaders like Nehru, Azad and Patel who agreed in principle that grouping or sitting in

sections should not be compulsory. But he wanted unfaltering guidance and moral support of the one who would never fail. He turned to Mahatma Gandhi.

On May 26, the APCC whole-heartedly endorsed Bardoloi's memorandum and requested the Congress Working Committee not to accept any arrangement under which Assam will be compelled to go to the Group 'C'. The APCC opposed the European representation to the Constituent Assembly and the League's demand that it alone could elect Muslim members. Bardoloi insisted that the answer to the situation was a strong mass movement. Accordingly the APCC decided to mobilise public opinion, observed 5th June as an "anti-grouping day" and send a strong delegation to represent Assam's case in the Working Committee meeting due to be held on June 10.

Sylhet did not initially join the movement. Abala Kanta Gupta, the Congress leader from the district, said, "Bardoloi's opinion does not reflect the sentiments of the Bengalees of Surma Valley or indeed of entire Assam. We feel, should there be grouping at all, the proposed grouping of Assam with Bengal is much more desirable." The Hill tribal leader, J.J.M. Nichols Roy at one stage had welcomed the Cabinet Mission plan, but now he opposed the grouping clause. His fear was that it would pave the way for Muslim domination over the tribal people.¹

While Assam carried out spontaneous and widespread protest movement throughout the province, the Congress delegation led by Maulana Tyebulla went to different provinces to canvass support for their cause. On June 8, the delegation met Pandit Nehru, who categorically assured, "All Congress

1. *Political History of Assam*, Vol. III, pp. 355-359. Bardoloi sent a telegram to Maulana Azad on June 10 explaining the stand of these groups.

provinces will be asked to frame their own constitutions, and on the basis of those, the Congress will draw up its draft constitution and go to the Constituent Assembly” “Who can force a constitution on Assam in section C, when Assam will not accept it at all?” he asked. He suggested that the Assam Assembly should pass a resolution giving a clear directive to the Constituent Assembly members on the issue.¹ Sardar Patel also endorsed Nehru’s suggestion. The group led by Tyebulla then met Gandhiji, who said, “Congress is at your back. Even if Congress fails to support you eventually, come out of the Congress.”

On June 10, the Congress Working Committee categorically stated in its resolution, “The Congress fully supports the Assam case. Assam shall frame its own constitution.” It also called upon the Assam Assembly to give mandate to its representatives in the Constituent Assembly. The Muslim League, however, had a different viewpoint. Therefore, the Assam delegation feared that the formation of compulsory grouping might ultimately lead to the emergence of Pakistan.

The Assam Assembly was summoned on July 16, 1946 to elect ten representatives to the Constituent Assembly.² Bardoloi also moved a resolution, which claimed rights for the province to frame its own constitution and have it settled by its own representatives. The resolution categorically asserted that “it will be detrimental to the interests of the province to form any section or sections, or group or groups with any other province of British India, for settling the Constitution for the province of Assam.” It rejected the very idea of group Constitution for the province and allocation of provincial

1. Ibid. p. 36.

2. The following members were elected : Gopinath Bardoloi, Rohini Chaudhury, Basant Kumar Das, J. J. M. Nichols Roy, Omeo Kumar Das, Dharamindhar Basumatari, Sir Saadullah, Abdul Hamid and Abdul Matin Chaudhury.

subjects by it. Then it specified its directives to the Assam representatives in the Constituent Assembly. The directives were as follows : (i) Assam's representatives should frame and settle the constitution for Assam. (ii) They should not take part in any meeting or meetings of any section or group for settling the constitution for Assam. (iii) They should resist all or any attempt made to set up a group constitution for settlement of questions regarding the provinces subject or subjects or for any such question being dealt with by any group of provinces on the basis of majority of votes. (iv) They should take part in the meeting of the Constituent Assembly for the purpose of framing the Union Constitution.

“To me the attitude conveyed in the motion is perfectly consistent with the statement of the Cabinet Mission both in respect of the provincial constitution as also about matters in which two or more provinces may be related,” asserted Bardoloi while moving the motion in the House. He elaborated his idea on provincial autonomy in the following manner: “The Cabinet Mission nowhere says that a province cannot exercise its right to frame its own constitution and cannot exercise its right to have any relationship with any other province as partners for discussion of subjects which are common to both the provinces. If any other interpretation is sought to be put I think that interpretation must be wrong and non-worthy of the constitution. Any other position cannot be consistent with the dignity and prestige of the province, and who among us are here who would not feel the prestige and dignity of Assam.”

Those who supported grouping were equally vehement. Sir Saadullah, himself an astute parliamentarian, argued that grouping was justified on the ground of economic and administrative convenience and interdependence. Bardoloi was not convinced. He asserted that a province's autonomy could not be sacrificed for the sake of mere economic and other benefits.

“It is from this very place that the honourable leader of the Muslim League tried to vindicate the honour of the province not once but on several occasions,” retorted Bardoloi. “Today, however, he talks in a different way. He has no hesitation to surrender the dignity and well-being of the province to the mercy of another province. To me it is deplorable sight indeed. A champion of the provincial autonomy is going to sacrifice his best interest for a place of subservience to another province.”

The motion was carried without division, as the Muslim League desisted from participation in voting. Sir Saadullah’s gesture in not pressing for a division was significant. Sir Andrew Clow, the then Governor of Assam, remarked while deposing before the Cabinet Mission that Saadullah was “at heart, a believer in Pakistan.”

In July 1946, Maulana Azad relinquished his presidency of the Congress and Nehru occupied his place. Nehru had some reservation about the Assam Assembly resolution and this he let Bardoloi know. “A section may definitely decide not to form any group and may continue as a section to consider provincial constitution,” wrote Pandit Nehru in his letter on July 22, 1946. He felt that the resolution was not happily worded, and was of the view that while making the provincial constitution, representatives of the province need not be out-voted by others. Bardoloi was not convinced. He said that the resolution was meant to enable the provinces to function as a unit within the sections and to ensure that they are not compelled to join any particular section.

The Congress stand on the compulsory grouping issue was not acceptable to the League, which in its Council on July 29, decided to withdraw its support to the Cabinet Mission plan. Jinnah questioned the authority of the Assam Assembly to give directions to its representative in the Constituent

Assembly. The League, instead of joining the Interim Government for which there was an invitation, called for a 'Direct Action Day' on August 16. The Congress Working Committee on the other hand in its session on August 10 accepted the Mission plan with its own interpretation and decided to join the Interim Government.

The League Direct Action Day took a turn for the worse in Calcutta, where severe communal riots broke out on August 16 and continued for three days. Lord Wavell, the Governor General, was apparently influenced by the communal violence and became more rigid on the grouping clause. He directed that the provinces must remain members of the sections until the first elections were held under the new constitution. The Congress Working Committee, faced with a new compulsion, slightly modified its stand on the grouping clause in its session on August 27. It decided to refer to the Federal Court for any interpretation of the disputed clause. On the other hand, Pandit Nehru, as the Head of the interim Government made the following announcement over radio : "We are perfectly prepared to and have accepted the position of sitting in sections which will consider the formation of groups."

Bardoloi induced the APCC to write to Pandit Nehru for clarification on the two issues of mediation by the Federal Court and sitting in sections. The letter was sent on September 16 and a reassuring reply came to Bardoloi on September 27. Nehru firmly said, "In no event are we going to agree to a province like Assam being forced against its will to do anything."

Wavell was keen to bring the League to the Interim Government and the Constituent Assembly. He persuaded the British Government to make a statement on December 6, 1946 giving its unilateral verdict on the grouping clause. It

declared that the provinces must sit in sections and decide issues by a simple majority vote in the event of an absence of agreement. If the Constituent Assembly should desire that this fundamental point be referred to the Federal Court, it should be done at an early date. Jinnah was given an additional assurance that if the verdict of the Federal court went against the League's position, the British Government would have a fresh look at the whole issue.

Bardoloi was apprehensive, and he, along with the other Constituent Assembly members from Assam urged the Congress Working Committee through a memorandum submitted to the Congress President on December 9, 1946, (i) not to agree to the interpretation which has been put to sections 19 (5) and (60), (ii) to alter the decision to abide by the arbitration of the Federal Court on the disputed clause, and (iii) to resist the imposition of condition by the British Government upon the Constituent Assembly. The latter should declare itself as a sovereign body and proceed to frame the Constitution by sticking to its own viewpoint in all matters including those relating to sections and grouping.

The APCC also sent protest notes.

Bardoloi did not rest there. He sent two of his emissaries, Mahendra Mohan Chaudhury and Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati, to meet Gandhiji in East Bengal and to seek his intervention in the matter. Accordingly they met Gandhiji at Srirampur on December 21. Gandhiji read Bardoloi's letter, and made a very forceful statement in support of the Assam stand. The following extract from the statement will make the bold stand of the unique revolutionary very clear :

“I have told Bardoloi that if there is no clear guidance from the Congress Working Committee, Assam should not go into sections. It should lodge its protest and

retire from the Constituent Assembly. It will be a kind of satyagraha against the Congress for the good of the Congress.”

“Rightly or wrongly, the Congress has come to the decision that it will stand by the judgement of the Federal Court. The dice are heavily loaded. The decision of the Federal Court will go against the Congress interpretation of ‘grouping’ as far as I can make out, for the simple reason that the Cabinet has got legal advice which upholds their decision.”

“The Federal Court is the creation of the British. It is a packed Court. But to be consistent, the Congress must abide by its decision whatever it may be. If Assam keeps quiet, it is finished. No one can force Assam to do what it does not want to. It is autonomous to a large extent today.”

“It must become fully independent and autonomous. Whether you have that courage, grit and gumption, I do not know. You alone can say that. But if you can make that declaration, it will be a fine thing. As soon as time comes for Constituent Assembly to go into session, you will say, ‘Gentlemen, Assam retires’. For the independence of India, it is the only condition. Each unit must be able to decide and to act for itself. I am hoping that in this, Assam will lead the way. I have the same advice for the Sikhs. But your position is much happier. You are a whole province. They are a community within a province. But I feel every individual has the right to act for himself, just as I have.”

“If Assam retires, it does not block, but leads the way to India’s independence. If we think independence is going to descend on our heads from England or

somewhere, we are greatly mistaken. It will not be independence. We will be crushed to atoms. We are fluctuating between independence and helpless dependence. The Cabinet Mission plans lies in between.”

“....If Assam takes care of itself, the rest of India will be able to look after itself. What have you to do with the constitution of the Union Government? You should form your own Constitution. That is enough. You have the basis of the Constitution of 1935. It is based on provincial autonomy. The hill people are with you. Many Muslims are also with you. The remainder can be, too, if you act on the square...”

“....If you don't act correctly now, Assam will be finished. Tell Bardoloi, I don't feel the least uneasiness. My mind is made up. Assam must not lose its soul. It must uphold itself against the whole world. Else, I will say that Assam has only manikins and no men. It is an impertinent suggestion that Bengal should dominate Assam in any way.... Tell people even if Gandhi tries to dissuade us, we won't listen.”¹

When Bardoloi handed over the note to the Working Committee, on December 21, it had to take a fresh look at the decision on the arbitration of the Federal Court on a matter vitally affecting provincial autonomy. Bardoloi attended the momentous session of the APCC at Guwahati on December 26 which reiterated the province's right to frame its own constitution. It asked for freedom to act accordingly. After the decision, Bardoloi accompanied by Sidhi Nath Sharma, met Gandhiji at Srirampur and again sought his advice. Gandhiji supported Bardoloi.

1. *Political History of Assam*. Vol. III, pp. 486-7; Appendix 1 (Source-APCC papers, 1946, APCC office, Guwahati).

The AICC met on January 5, 1947 to discuss the December 6, statement of the British Government, Assam had a few delegates in it. While the resolution moved by Pandit Nehru went a good deal in assuaging Assam's fears, the final draft recorded a general acceptance of the British statement; it also mildly referred to the arbitration of the Federal Court on the grouping clause. As a team, the Assam members found the resolution somewhat short of their expectations. Gandhiji however said categorically that, "the resolution passed by the AICC gives enough if not clear guidance to Assam, for it will not compel Assam to act against the declared wish of the people through the Legislative Assembly."¹ Bardoloi issued a statement on January 8, 1947 saying that though Assam was prepared to sit in the section in the Constituent Assembly, she would stick to the July mandate of the Assam Legislative Assembly. He expressed genuine fears that the Muslim League might try to impose its majority view on the minority of Assam members, and was apprehensive about it. This shows that he was not willing to compromise Assam's stand and kept his options open. The APCC approved his stand by passing a resolution on February 6, 1947.

On February 20, Atlee announced the British Government decision to transfer power by a date not later than June, 1948. The Viceroy was changed. Lord Mountbatten replaced Lord Wavell. He persuaded the Congress and the League leaders to accept the division of India. So far as Assam was concerned, the new plan left it untouched except for the Sylhet district whose future was to be settled through a referendum. The Cabinet Mission plan was abandoned and with it the problem whether Assam and Bengal would be grouped together also vanished. Mountbatten accepted the fact that Assam would be a part of the Indian Union.

1. *Political History of Assam*. Vol. III, p. 386, the quote is from Gandhiji's letter to Maulana Tyebulla, the President of the APCC.

The anti-grouping movement under the leadership of Bardoloi won its point though indirectly. The referendum on Sylhet took place on July 6 and 7. On July 14, the results were declared with 2,39,619 votes going for Pakistan, and 1,84,041 votes for maintaining status quo. The bulk of the Sylhet district went to East Pakistan, but the Radcliffe Boundary Commission later ruled that the four Hindu-majority *thanas* (Patharkandi, Ratabari, Badarpur and half of Karimganj) should be included in India.

The Mountbatten plan divided India, but advanced the date of independence by about ten and a half months. The Muslim League got the whole of East Bengal and a large chunk of the Sylhet district. Yet it was not satisfied. It laid claim for Cachar, the Khasi-Jayantia Hills, and Goalpara. Bardoloi soon came to know that the League had an eye on Shillong, one of the prettiest hill stations of the world. When he met Mountbatten, the latter casually asked him about the location of Shillong. This increased his apprehension that the Radcliffe Commission might concede the League's demand. He arranged another interview with Lord Mountbatten with the full knowledge of Gandhi, Nehru and Patel. At a party in the Imperial Hotel, Delhi, Bardoloi found Mountbatten alone and before he could broach the subject, the latter told him, "On the day I met you, I could not explain to you certain things, which were yet confidential. But I can speak to you now. Sir was offered the Governorship of East Bengal. He had three small children and his wife (he mentioned their age). He could not keep them in Dacca in this heat. He was, therefore, wanting to know from me if there was any cooler place of higher altitude in East Bengal where he could keep his wife and children. He had just left my room when you came in and who could give better information about East Bengal and Sylhet than you? I, therefore, wanted to know from you all about the place. And you probably thought that I was thinking of ceding these areas to East Bengal. And

then you spoke to Gandhiji.”

Suddenly he gave a big pinch on Bardoloi's arm and added, “As you know now, nothing could be further from my thoughts. I shall write to Gandhiji. But go and tell him all that I have told you.”

In an earlier interview also, Mountbatten had tried to assuage the fears of Bardoloi regarding further ceding of Assamese territory to East Bengal. He had told him that the terms of the Boundary Commission were so obvious that it could not include the two districts in East Pakistan, even if it wished to.

The Sylhet referendum caused deep psychological worry to Bardoloi. “In this province, the aftermath of Sylhet transfer and attendant evils of transfer of poor clerks rendered the political situation bitter,” wrote Bardoloi in a note in moments of his deep agony. “And now I have received a few letters threatening my murder by unknown hands. I am feeling perplexed as to what would be the best way to fight these evils. Should I remain in the government or go out of it? I wrote a long letter to Bapuji.”

Bapu's reply came after sometime. He said that Bardoloi's feeling was correct, but he would not hazard an advice. That would be blind leading the blind. His last words were, “Set apart some time every morning and pray”.

Prior to this exchange of communication. Bardoloi had a meeting with Gandhiji sometime at the end of July or beginning of August, 1947. Bardoloi, as usual, came to share his anxieties about further ceding of Assam's land to East Pakistan. Before he could finish, Gandhiji suddenly said, “I have heard all about your attitude regarding the separation of Sylhet. Why did you agree to the referendum?”

“I was not a party to it,” replied Bardoloi.

“Can anything happen in a province without its Prime Minister becoming a party to it ?”

Bardoloi then told him all that he knew. “Both I and Mountbatten attended a lunch party. There he told me that he presumed I was indifferent about Sylhet going to Pakistan. I told him that while it was true that a large number of people in Assam Valley wanted Sylhet to be separated and at one time, even the Hindus of Sylhet wanted the same, the congressmen of both the places wanted to live together as they fought together for ten long years, under my leadership for weal or for woe. Mountbatten also met the leader of Sylhet, Basanta Kumar Das (who was the Home Minister of my Cabinet) at a garden party the same evening. He agreed to the referendum. The Working Committee agreed to it. How can I fight the Working Committee ?”

“Did I not tell you that you should be prepared to fight any wrong ? Why did you not do so ? Seven years ago, you adopted satyagraha. Do you consider that to be a mistake ? Was it not wrong to follow the Working Committee in this ?” Gandhiji was in a mood of deep spiritual agony in those days. “Who wants me now ?” he said. Bardoloi knew that independence not only brought with it communal riots, hatred and partition of the country, but moral degradation also.

Assam, during 1946 and the early part of 1947, saw not only the unique anti-grouping movement, but also another kind of movement launched by the Muslim League. The Muslim League in Assam tried various means to mobilise Muslim opinion for Pakistan. One was the campaign for settlement of all encroachers from East Bengal on Assam lands without any consideration for the legitimate interests of the province. Another was political exploitation of religious

sentiments of the Muslims. The third was evident in the method adopted by the Saadullah Government for enumeration in the 1941 census operations. The classification was made on the basis of community rather than on the basis of religion. The intention was to take the tribal population away from the Hindu fold and enumerate them as 'Tribals', and thereby reduce the number of Hindus in the province. Bardoloi was opposed to this type of politics and he did oppose it publicly and firmly.

In 1946, the League intensified its campaign for Pakistan in Assam. But in the provincial elections, it failed to win a majority. It was a great setback. The League Direct Action Day on August 16 was observed in Assam but it made no impact on the people. The Assamese Muslims were lukewarm towards any extremist action and to the idea of grouping or Pakistan. On February 19, 1946, the Muslim League directed its campaign against the eviction policy of the Congress government. Even Jinnah warned the Bardoloi government that a "situation would be created which would not be conducive to the well-being of the people of Assam." The resistance to eviction operations in the professional grazing reserves grew violent and in a number of places, the police had to resort to firings.

Bardoloi, however, stood firm and in this, he was supported by all secular and law-abiding citizens. Even Mahatma Gandhi felt that the Muslim League campaign directed from East Bengal for legitimisation of large scale encroachment on professional grazing reserves was wrong in principle and violated the spirit of law. The campaign, however, continued unabated till April, 1947, when the Indian public opinion was fully aroused against it. The League planned to change the campaign into a regular warfare. But Bardoloi dealt with the situation firmly, and as a result, the 'invasion plan' mooted by extremists like

Maulana Bhasani (Abdul Hamid Khan) came to nothing. The moderate section led by Saadullah disapproved the militant guerilla activities. Bardoloi's firm handling of the situation, indifference of the Assamese Muslims to extremist action, financial worries and Maulana Bhasani's growing unpopularity ultimately led to the collapse of the movement. The Assam Provincial Muslim League abandoned it formally on June 11, 1947. The movement had an inherent weakness. Both its leadership and volunteers were from East Bengal. The Muslim League in Assam also suffered from internal dissensions. It was formally dissolved on June 30, 1948.¹

According to Pyarelal, the Muslim League had two motives in sending *Khilji Dastas* (in imitation of Bakhtiar Khilji's invasion of Bengal in the 13th century) to Assam to take illegal possession of lands in the province and to refuse to be evicted therefrom. One was to relieve the pressure of overpopulation in East Bengal and the other, which was the main, was "to alter the communal ratio of the population of Assam." The Bardoloi government had to treat it as an administrative issue and evict the encroachers. The decision to prevent encroachment on government lands had been taken earlier by the Assam Government long before, as a result of an agreement with Saadullah, the leader of the Muslim League in Assam Assembly. Gandhiji supported Bardoloi's action saying that "illegal trespassers, merely

1. *Mahatma Gandhi—Last Phase* : p. 204; Pyarelal writes; "In Assam, there were 34.42 Lakhs of Muslims as against 67.50 Lakhs of non-Muslims. But the latter included 24.84 Lakhs of tribals. The Muslim League's plan was well known. It was to separate the tribals from the Hindus, give them separate electorates and promise of autonomy and convert Assam into a Muslim majority province by organising a mass immigration of Muslims from some of the densely overpopulated border districts of Bengal". This is a correct representation of the Muslim League's point of view.

because they happened to be Muslims or Bengalis, could not claim exception from the operation of the common law.”¹ Important Muslim leaders of Assam including Sir Saadullah, were against this movement, which was violent and rabidly communal.

On 15 August, 1947, India became independent. The great struggle for retaining Assam’s right to provincial autonomy and to decide its own future ended. Under Bardoloi’s leadership, Assam gave a good account of herself. In Bardoloi’s political career, this period was the most glorious and significant.

During his period of premiership, Bardoloi was in regular touch with the Central Home Minister, Sardar Patel. In his letter dated March 3, 1947, Bardoloi referred to the encroachment on grazing reserves by the Muslim Leaguers in order to settle the Muslims on those lands, and said : “Most of the troubles will arise out of the government’s policy of maintaining the inviolability of the grazing reserves which was agreed to by all parties including the Muslim League and also by the government’s attempt to distribute available wastelands to all including Hindus, Muslims, tribals and immigrants themselves”. Sardar Patel, in his reply to Bardoloi on April 11, 1947, firmly pledged his support to Bardoloi’s eviction policy and said, “You will have my full support in your stand on legal rights. Not an inch of land should be surrendered to the illegal immigrants and you must stand solidly and firmly on the policy you are implementing.” He was also ready to give military aid in case “civil forces were unable to cope with the situation”.²

Bardoloi wrote another letter to Patel on April 18, 1948 from Calcutta after attending the Inter-Dominion Conference

1. Pyarelal: *Mahatma Gandhi—The Last Phase*, Vol. I, p. 160

2. *Sardar Patel’s Letters (Mostly Unknown)*, Part II, p. 29

held there. Pakistan at that time carried on propaganda for inclusion of Khasi states and other hill areas on its border into its territory. Pakistan leaders also did not want to take responsibility of Pakistani immigrants in India who illegally entered Assam. Bardoloi wrote, "I am opposed to any matter concerning my province being discussed in the Inter-Dominion Conference without the consent of my government; I could not undertake the responsibility of committing my government to a matter in which a major policy of the Government was involved".¹ This was Bardoloi's reaction to the Pakistani plea at the Inter-Dominion Conference for raising above-mentioned issues. He challenged Pakistan's right to speak on behalf of minorities in India. It appears that he also was annoyed at the stand taken by the Indian representative at the conference. He consistently maintained that Assam was opposed to the settlement of law-breaking elements and encroachers from Pakistan in Indian territory.

At that time Bardoloi was in bad health and he wanted to retire, "My heart is possibly damaged beyond repair," he wrote to Patel. He was compelled to reduce his working hours from 16 hours to 8 hours.

Sardar Patel promised to review the minutes of the Inter-Dominion Conference and wrote in his letter dated April 22, 1948 in an affectionate tone, "I am very sorry to hear about your health. Assam needs you and we all want you to be at the helm of affair there. At the same time your health requires careful attention. I would therefore suggest you need not resign but delegate your functions to other ministers, keeping in your hands the direction of policy and other essential matters. I would advice you to so regulate this as to leave you with work for five or six hours so that you can have rest even while you are working." Sir Akbar

1. *S. P. S. correspondence*, Vol. 6, p. 97

Hydari, the Governor of Assam, in his letter to Sardar Patel dated April 6, 1948, endorsed the suggestion.

The sudden abolition of the post of Dominion Agent in Manipur by the Central Home Ministry on the advice of the Assam Governor, Sir Akbari Hydari, seemed to have displeased Bardoloi, who felt that he should have been consulted before such a step was taken. The Assam Provincial Congress Committee represented the matter to Sardar Patel and in his letter dated May 27, 1948, Sidhinath Sarma, the Secretary, characterised it as the 'most unpopular act.' The APCC evidently felt that the right of the Assam Ministry to 'advise the Governor' was vital for constitutional democracy. Bardoloi, whose health was shattered was willing to resign. But Sardar Patel felt that 'the question of Dominion Agent in Manipur had nothing to do with the Provincial Government.' He said that the Assam Ministry could have no grievance on this score and it could not be treated as a matter of confidence. He took upon himself entire responsibility of abolishing the post.

Bardoloi was persuaded not to insist on his resignation and ultimately he yielded. In his letter to Patel on June 22, 1948, he noted, "I could inform you that nothing would please me more than to serve India and Assam at this critical period, but God alone will decide how long I could continue to do so." In his reply dated June, 1948, Sardar Patel wrote to Bardoloi that the decision which he had reached was in the interest of the Province and he would never regret his decision.

Bardoloi never repented his decision. But he knew his end was drawing near.

VI

Last Years

AFTER INDEPENDENCE, Bardoloi continued as the Prime Minister of Assam until his death on August 5, 1950. His health was not good, and he suffered from high blood pressure and a dilated heart. He could rule free Assam as the Premier only for about three years. Within these three years, he could only plan for the future.

On September 2, 1947, the APPC passed a resolution for ushering in a democratic structure based on socialism. In 1948, the Bardoloi cabinet passed its industrial policy resolution which outlined the industrialisation programme for Assam. It envisaged textile, sugar, alcohol, jute, paper and electrical goods industries in the State sector and plastic, light machines, chemicals, electro-chemical, colour and varnish, rayon and artificial silk in the semi-state sector.¹ Bardoloi made it clear that the right of management of these industries would be in the hand of the Assamese people. For this he prepared a scheme of training local youths in management and technical education. Had this resolution been implemented, the Assamese society would not have faced the problems of poverty and inequality so acutely today. Unhappily there was opposition to his policy from vested interests, and the Government of India adopted an industrial policy resolution

1. Prof. A. K. Sharma, M.P. : *Amat aru Abhimat*, pp. 208-12

which encouraged mixed economy. In 1949, Bardoloi reiterated that for a province like Assam, full socialisation was the only way. The state had resources for that. But he regretted that the vested interests had made it difficult for them to proceed with the programme.

In the field of education, his contribution was memorable. A university for Assam had been on the agenda since 1917, when the Sadler Commission first conceived the idea. In 1944, the movement for a university took concrete shape, when a convention in Guwahati under the presidentship of Bardoloi, decided to make the existing Trust Board for the proposed Guwahati University more representative and work-oriented. Soon it became a people's movement, and a substantial fund was collected. A name was given to it and land was selected for acquisition in Guwahati. The Guwahati University Bill, 1947 was introduced in the Assam Assembly by Bardoloi. After the Select Committee had scrutinised it, the Bill was placed before the House on September 12, 1947. It was passed unanimously and the Governor gave his assent on October 15. The Guwahati University started its career from January 1, 1948. Kaka Kalelkar was Bardoloi's first choice for the Vice Chancellorship. Kakaji declined the offer. Then his choice fell on the world renowned Sanskrit scholar K. K. Hundique. Happily he accepted the offer. Bardoloi wanted the University to be residential and people-oriented. He wanted it to create an intellectually capable elite to serve the lowly and the poor. He believed that the University would not only be a cultural centre for higher education, but would contribute towards the real growth of the Assamese people and towards the development of rich resources of the region. It should inspire students to serve the people of the region including the tribals in a spirit of humility and self-sacrifice. It should also take up the cause of Assamese language and

literature.¹

Besides the University, Bardolai was also instrumental in establishing technical colleges in Medicine and Engineering. Education for social work received his proper attention. He was the moving spirit behind the formation of the Assam Rastrabhasa Prachar Samiti and the building of Kasturba trading centre for constructive work in Guwahati. Both these institutions are doing good work even now. Besides these, he patronised a number of other constructive workers' centres in different parts of the province.

The Guwahati High Court was one of the institutions for which Assam had been long fighting. It was established in 1948 during Bardolai's reign.

A Constitution sub-committee was formed under the Chairmanship of Gopinath Bardolai, to go into the question of tribal autonomy within the provincial structure of administration.² During the British days, they were kept as excluded and partially excluded areas. Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy, the Khasi leader, was one of the members of the sub-committee. It recommended an administrative set-up of their own in all matters affecting the customs, laws of inheritance, administration of justice, land, forests etc. of the tribal people. This set-up was to be called District Council. In each well-demarcated tribal area, such a council was to provide a simple and inexpensive administration.

The main aim behind this constitutional set-up was :

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1. Dr. M. Neog : *Viswabidyalaye, Bhasa Bhasan aru Bhraman*, pp. 9 to 15
 2. The committee was called 'The North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Area Sub-committee.' The sixth Schedule of the Constitution was framed on the recommendations of this Sub-Committee.

(i) to preserve the tribal way of life ; (ii) to provide maximum autonomy to manage their own affairs ; (iii) to keep the tribals living in strategic areas free from exploitation and domination by more advanced sections of the population ; and (iv) to protect legitimate tribal economic interests and right of management of forest, land, etc.

The subsequent balkanisation of Assam, from which the Naga Hills, the Khasi Hills, the Garo Hills, the Mizo Hills and the Arunachal area were separated to constitute small States, proves that the Sixth Schedule did not fully achieve the purpose for which it was introduced. But the separatist elements in these areas strived less for integration with Assam than for enlarging their autonomy granted under the Schedule. But Bardoloi had an altruistic motive in recommending the case for tribal autonomy. Perhaps history may yet prove that his vision of an united Assam was right.

What he told the Constituent Assembly revealed his genuine concern for integration. "It is not unknown to you, that the rule of the British Government and the activities of the foreign missions always went together," Bardoloi told the August body, on September 9, 1949. "These areas were formerly entirely excluded areas in the sense that none from the plains could go there and contact them. That was the position till August 15, 1947, when India became independent."

He said that separatism was implanted on their mind by the then rulers and officers. Any outsider residing there could be expelled within twenty-four hours. During the World War, he said, the hill people were encouraged to develop a sense of separation and isolation. They were told that "at the end of the war, they would be independent states managing their affairs in their own way." They were led to believe that the entire hill areas would be constituted into a

province and put under one governor. He said the plans were hatched in England "in which ex-Governors of Assam evidently took part to create some sort of a kingdom there".

"Now with this background, our investigations began in 1946," added Bardoloi. "People of this area were already suffused with these ideas of isolation and separation." The sub-committee had to face the fundamental question whether methods of force (i.e. military or para-military force) would be used to bring about integration, or methods that procured willing cooperation of these people would be applied.

The sub-committee also was impressed by the tribal democracy, their method of settling disputes and the democratic institutions. "Whether we should raise in them a spirit of enmity or hatred by application of force or whether we should bring them up under principle of government by goodwill and love?" Bardoloi asked. He preferred the latter course.

Any one who understands the tribal situation of North East India is likely to appreciate what Bardoloi said. Gandhi's India, whenever it is faced with such a critical situation, generally opts for a peaceful method. Bardoloi was as much a Gandhian as he was a realist. However, every student of tribal affairs in North East India knows that the basic approach evolved by Bardoloi was right.

Bardoloi knew and loved the tribal people and they too trusted him. Had he been alive for a few more years to implement the Sixth Schedule, it might be that he could have achieved far better results than his successors did. He visited the tribal villagers in their homes, and developed rapport with all the important leaders.

He had a catholicity of mind which only his intimate friends knew. This was revealed particularly during the communal clashes between groups of indigenous people and East Bengal immigrants over land mainly in the tribal belts and remote areas of Goalpara and Kamrup districts. The flow of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan following riots there also added fuel to the fire. There was violence and loss of life. Bardoloi, accompanied by his colleagues, toured the area, formed relief committees and took adequate measures for rehabilitation of the riot victims. It was a difficult task, and he had to bear with hostile public opinion.

After the hectic tour, he came back to Shillong to take rest. His health was not good and he had had a mild heart attack. Suddenly there was a frantic call from the people of a Muslim-dominated village in Kamrup district. He rushed to the place immediately and addressed a big public meeting in Nagarbera High School compound. This was his last public meeting. Strangely enough, his first public meeting as a Congressman also had been held there in 1920. The people of Nagarbera assured him that they would maintain communal peace.

Bardoloi was constantly on the move befriending people. His visit to the hill districts were memorable. The tribal people regarded him as their friend and he tried his best to bring about a genuine integration of mind in the region and fight separatism.

But his health began gradually to fail. On August 5, 1950, he came down to Guwahati from Shillong. His friends had urged him to take rest and recoup his health. But he did not pay much heed to their advice.

On the same night, he witnessed his last drama in life. In the Bhaskar Natya Mandir at Guwahati a local amateur

theatre group presented a social drama, called 'Pratibad' by Anil Chaudhury, and Bardoloi enjoyed the performance till the end. He was happy to find that co-acting had become a permanent feature of Assamese theatre and spent considerable time with the actors and actresses in the hall after the performance.

At late night, he died of a heart attack. He was then 60. It was a sad day for Assam and the country. Every section of the population mourned his loss. His death was untimely. His deep understanding of the problems of the region made him an indispensable man in the national politics of the day. His humanity was a binding factor of unity amongst various sections of the people in the region. This was confirmed by the crowd of mourners that visited his residence after death. Those who could not come wrote most compassionate letters. The tribal leaders from different corners of Assam came on their own to pay their last homage ; so also the other sections of the population.

The Man and His Ideas

BARDOLOI WAS an acknowledged follower of Gandhiji. According to Kaka Kalelkar, Gandhiji had an implicit trust in Bardoloi and he said that Gopinath would never indulge in any act that was likely to harm India's self-fulfilment. This was true. During the anti-grouping movement, he proved it to the hilt. Although he fought for Assam's autonomy, he never gave up his loyalty to India even for a moment. Even when he fought the Muslim League politically he never abandoned his principle of secular humanism. He had equal respects for all the religions of the world.

He wrote six books for children. Of these, five were written in Jorhat jail. He began with the Rama story. He treated Rama as a historical personage and an ideal man. By far, his most fascinating work was the short biography of Buddha. He presented Buddha as a rational and complete man, whose disinterested self-sacrifice for the sake of mankind and whose message of self-reliance deeply impressed him. His presentation of the lives of Jesus Christ and Mohammed as redeemers of humanity was both authentic and rational. He showed how they followed different methods to fulfil their missions in life. Both relentlessly pursued the aims of universal peace, human brotherhood and truth. He believed that only communalists and vested interests misinterpreted the teachings of the prophets to suit their selfish ends. He

denounced the role of erring priests, padres and mullahs. God may be called by different names, but He is one.

He included Gandhiji among the prophets. Before he took up Gandhiji's biography, Bardoloi sought the Mahatma's permission to depict him as a prophet. Gandhiji raised an objection, but that did not deter his ardent disciple. "You will offend the orthodoxy by bracketing me with the *avatars* and prophets and I think rightly," wrote Gandhiji, "You cannot write of a living man in the same way as of the dead, who by common consent have been acclaimed as Great Teachers." Bardoloi set aside this objection saying that great men defy classification and his intention in writing the biography was to inculcate a feeling of toleration for all religions in the mind of his juvenile readers. He was a God-fearing man, and believed in the role of these great teachers in human and social reconstruction. His biography of Gandhiji is readable and appreciative. It covers all the important events in Gandhiji's life till 1941. He said that Gandhiji's biography and the Indian freedom movement were indistinguishable.

He wrote the biography of his mentor, T. R. Phookan, in a different vein. Phookan was a leader of men, not a prophet. He was a legendary hero of the people, but not a blind follower of the great or a junta. Long before Gandhiji asked Bardoloi to rebel against the Congress for the good of the Congress, Tarun Ram did it on his own. His colleagues denounced him of disloyalty, but he stood his ground. When he asserted that Assam was the most peculiar case and the Congress here should also work in the parliamentary front, he was misunderstood. Later on in 1939 both Subhash Bose and Gandhiji had to advise Bardoloi not to resign from Prime Ministership. They asked him to continue in office to counter the Muslim League's move to change the population-structure of Assam. Bardoloi's biography of Phookan brings out his unique and many-sided personality to the fore, and it is one

of the most lively biographies written in Assamese. Bardoloi pinpointed two qualities in Phookan's personality, self-reliance and detachedness. Even in the critical moments of great physical and mental sufferings, Phookan never lost his balance of mind. According to Bardoloi his sufferings were greater than those of King Lear, whom Shakespeare had assigned a mad man's role. Phookan told Bardoloi, "I belong to the family of a *sanyasi* and am prepared to leave home like a mendicant with a *kamandalu* in hand".

Bardoloi translated Gandhiji's *Avasakti-Yoga* into Assamese from Hindi. Gandhiji blessed his effort. In his preface to the book, Bardoloi said that the book was not an ordinary treatise of spiritualism, but contained within it the inner story of a great man's quest for realisation of his true self in the true religious spirit.

In all these books, Bardoloi's indebtedness to Gandhiji is clear. Gandhiji's ideas on religious tolerance, true religion and disinterested service seemed to have moved him deeply. From Tarun Ram Phookan, he probably learnt that love of his own province did not conflict with his love of India. His idea of national integration too seemed to be based on the idea of decentralised democracy. His approach to the tribal problem as revealed in the recommendations of the Constitutional Sub-committee confirms this clearly. We have also seen how he allowed himself to be constantly guided by Gandhiji in one of the most critical moments of his political career, specially during the anti-grouping movement. Of course, his idea of provincial autonomy coincided with Gandhiji's idea on the subject.

Did he behave as a Gandhian while running the administration? Bardoloi got little time to work in free India, and Bapuji's sudden passing away left him without a guide. However, that Bardoloi wanted to do something on the

Gandhian line is clear from the letter Margaret Slade (Mira Ben) wrote to him : “What a tremendous task you, who are Gandhiji’s friends and followers, have taken upon your shoulders in trying to carry his way and life into the political world. To do it while he was still here to turn to for guidance and strength must have been difficult enough. To face the future without him is a burden almost too heavy to bear. I assure you of my deep sympathy and, for what it is worth, of my unswerving support in your heroic attempt to give life and reality to Bapu’s ideals in this province.” (February 2, 1948).

However, Bardoloi confessed that the task would not be easy. “People like us thought,” he said, “that since independence is come, we would all settle down to the construction of a new India, and a new province. But it appeared, to my great sorrow, that the forces of destruction took possession of the minds of some people more than they had possibly at any time. Selfishness of the worst type seemed to have taken possession of men, from which even some Congressmen did not seem to escape.” The confession was significant.

Bardoloi firmly believed in a linguistic state. This was evident from the telegram he sent to Maulana Azad and Gandhiji. “The people of Assam would under no circumstances agree to go to Bengal in order that a province with linguistic and cultural basis in terms of the Congress Manifesto may be formed.” This telegram was sent when the Assam Governor was reported to have hatched plan for amalgamation of Bengal and Assam on the one hand and separation of the hill areas from India on the other, just on the eve of transfer of power. This idea Bardoloi pursued throughout his life consistently and with determination.

Bardoloi had a firm belief in the constructive work programme of Gandhiji. He always toyed with the idea of giving

up parliamentary politics in order to devote himself to constructive work. On February 11, 1946, Gopinath Bardoloi along with a team of workers from Assam met Gandhiji and had a detailed discussion about such a programme. At Gandhiji's instance, the team met Smt. Asha Devi Aryanayakam, Shri Krishnadas Jaju, Shri J. C. Kumarappa, Shri Parvekar and Shri Jhaverbhai Patel and discussed about preparing a scheme of work in Assam along with a training institute. The scheme included khadi, village industries, *go-seva*, agriculture and basic education. The team bought all the available literature on the subject and studied the work going on in Gandhiji's ashram. It was decided to depute two women workers for intensive training there. One of them was Amal Prova Das, now the doyen of constructive workers in Assam. She received in 1980 the Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Social service. The experts laid more stress on imbibing the philosophy of the "whole endeavour of establishing self-independent units of villages under Gandhiji's leadership."

Gandhiji told Bardoloi at the time of leaving Wardha : "The programme of constructive work is more than law and parliamentary work. Its completion means concrete swaraj won by truth and non-violence. What is true of you is true of every Congressman, be he or she great or not. This is my message." Bardoloi's deep interest in constructive work remained with him till the time of his death.

One of the pet ideas of Bardoloi was non-violence. At the time of writing the biography of Hazarat Mohammed, he faced the difficulty of "reconciling" the Prophet's life at Madina, where he used arms, with ahimsa. He wrote to Gandhiji from the Jorhat Jail on April 26, 1941 seeking his views on the point. He faced a similar problem in the case of Sri Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna to fight. "So far as the life of Mohammed is concerned," wrote Bardoloi, "I have already started historical arguments, viz., that although ahimsa

might have been fully understood and practised by Buddha and Christ, its application was restricted to individual lives and barring a few recent exceptions, never has it been used by or against the State until now by you.” Bardoloi requested Gandhiji to send his answer.

“Your question is difficult,” Gandhiji replied in his letter of May 6; 1941, “I believe with those Muslims who think that the Prophet’s years in Mecca were the years in which he taught and lived pure non-violence. He became an administrator in Medina and thus ceased to be a pure teacher. In any case the net affect of the Quran is that non-violence is one obligation, but violence is permissible. We are bound to accept as authoritative the interpretation generally given by the Muslim world and not the one I have prepared.

“As to Krishna’s advice to Arjuna you should read my *Anasakti-Yoga*. If you have not read it, you will tell me and I shall send you a copy.” That was how Bardoloi came to translate the *Anasakti-Yoga*.

Bardoloi had deep faith in the potency of Gandhiji’s non-violence. In the midst of the last World War, he felt that “the simplicity and directness of Gandhiji’s methods were making a stronger appeal to the minds of all thinking people.” The impending danger of mankind as a result of the pursuance of the former methods, he opined, was forcing on us the truth and reality of the latter. He dreamt of a new world order “where countries and nations must not only live as equals to one another, but cease to think, speak and act in terms of material exploitation of the weaker by the stronger.”

He felt that the basic reason for failure of the old order, characterised by war, political make-beliefs and diplomatic intrigues, was its inherent belief in violence, exploitation, race hatred and many other evils. “Does the Gandhian

ideology furnish any answer to this question?" Bardoloi asked. "Surely it does. And however difficult the solution may be as an immediate objective, it is quite clear that nothing but recognition of such ideals will be able to remove from this world this great evil of world catastrophe." According to him, capitalism, which reduced three-fourths of the world's population to poverty and subjugation, could not guarantee a new world order. He was not sure if anti-imperialist Russia, inspite of its "exhibition of its intolerance of capitalist methods," could ever overcome the evils of a mechanised state" and bring about the new world order. He honestly felt that Gandhiji "could create the moral force 'necessary' for the emancipation of the world from its current annihilating and barbarous tendencies". According to him the Mahatma was trying to solve the riddle of the world in Sevagram.

Bardoloi's allegiance to Gandhiji was unmistakable. The relationship he developed with him was deeply humane. The last time he saw him was when he was undergoing fast in the Birla House for the pacification of communal feelings in Delhi. He went there with the express purpose of persuading Gandhiji to give up the fast. He described the scene in graphic words :

"It was 2 o'clock when I arrived at Birla House and directly went to the yard where Gandhiji was lying on the cot in the December sun of New Delhi. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Saheb was discussing with him the conditions under which he would be prepared to break his fast. I went and caught hold of his feet for a few seconds and kept standing near his legs for about 10 minutes, while the conversation was going on. He only smiled at me. I had full opportunity of studying his face and the pose in which he lay on the cot. He was speaking in low but distinct tones with usual emphasis. He had the Burma hat given to him

by Thakin Nu on his head, and his face was aglow with a radiance that I had not seen in him for several months. He was protected from the western sun by Dr. Sushila Nair and some other ladies. But nobody could miss the beaming happiness that was radiating from his face, apparently arising out of divine duty done. Every moment of the talk, however, made me anxious about his condition. It was the seventh day of the fast, and I decided not to speak anything, although I came with determination to ask him to break the fast.

“Immediately after the Maulana had finished, he beckoned me to his side, with a smile which will linger in my memory all the rest of my life, I took one step towards him, and told him that I had nothing to say and, with a *namaskar*, left his side to the place where the Maulana was talking with Dr. Nair and others. I did not listen to the conversation, but all the time, I was contemplating on Bapu’s fast and the duty that the same imposed on me.”

Bardoloi’s own words describe the relationship between him and his master. Silence spoke eloquently where speech failed.

That was his last interview. Later on he wrote with a heavy heart, “Today I feel an agony in my heart when I feel that I did not go near him even when he beckoned me, although I did so from the tenderest of feelings in me.”

Bardoloi received the greatest shock in his life on January 30, 1948. He received the news of Gandhiji’s assassination at his Shillong residence and at first refused to believe it. He described his own state of mind thus :

“It was 6.15 P.M. on January 30, when a newspaper correspondent of Shillong asked me on the phone whether I had heard that Gandhiji was shot dead while going to the prayer meeting. I simply did not believe him, but the minute after minute, my phone kept ringing on. The same ominous query was in everybody’s lips. I now felt it must be real and felt so stunned that I became mute for the time being. I did not know what to do, where to go. And again I tried to console myself by saying ‘No it can’t be true’. I then sought a call with Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, and in five minutes, I got him, only to be told that the light of India and the world had gone out from us forever.

“Is it possible to describe, in words, the void that we are feeling at this separation ? To me he had always been a force influencing or trying to influence every thought and action of my life. I know that I could not even expect to live upto what he wished of me and my colleagues. But the very fact that he was looking at us even from a distance, used to inspire us. During the last six years, I felt that he infused in me a strength which only a spiritual leader could bless his follower with. His advice was seldom in the nature of ‘do this, and do that’ but always to inspire me with courage to fight out anything that I considered evil or wrong.”

Bardoloi was one of those Congress leaders who was not happy with the British administration. There was a fearful gulf between the officials in the administration and the people. Within the limitations of the system, he tried to serve the people to the best of his capacity. Outside, he was regarded as the authentic voice of the people of Assam. Mourning his death, Sardar Patel rightly observed, “It is difficult to think of Assam without Gopinath Bardoloi. He had indentified

himself with the interest of his state, and for years, the political life had so much intermingled with his great personality that we had come to think of the two entities being always synonymous.”

A significant tribute was paid to him by the Naga rebel leader A. Z. Phizo in 1950 : “With only a few others, Bardoloi saw years ago, amidst the gathering storm, a patch of blue sky: In that great vision of his and his unremitting contribution towards its realisation will be found truly depicted the impress of his character which neither death nor time can rob away. In life, Bardoloi was a friend of the Nagas whose friendship they held dear. Nagas have been made poorer today that he has gone.” Even his worst opponents recognised his humanism.

APPENDIX I

A HISTORIC TALK OF GOPINATH BARDOLOI WITH GANDHIJ¹

[This recorded note of the late Gopinath Bardoloi about a historic interview which he had with Gandhiji immediately after the partition of the country was published on the occasion of his fifteenth death anniversary.]

It may be some time in 1947 that I met Gandhiji again. The division of India was affected and referendum in Sylhet and NWP were also over in favour of Muslim League. Murder, arson, loot and rape—each community trying to out-do the other in the two Punjabs—had begun on a scale never dreamt of. Referendum had decided the cession of Pakistan, but the boundaries were yet to be determined by a Commission. Judges appointed by India and Pakistan both for the Punjab and Bengal including Sylhet could not agree and a British arbitrator had to do the final work.

On the Assam side the Eastern Pakistan claimed the inclusion of Cachar, Goalpara and what not. The Judges were hearing the cases and the air was thick with all sorts of rumours. While at Delhi, I found that some Khasi gentlemen and ladies having leaning for the Muslim League went

1. The copy of the note formed part of Bardoloi's personal papers now in the possession of his daughter, Dr. Lily Majinder Barua, a teacher of Botany in B. Baruah College, Guwahati.

there to meet Lord Mountbatten and Mr. Jinnah. Serious misgivings arose in my mind as to what the offshoot of this commission would be. I spoke to Panditji about it and he wanted me to meet Lord Mountbatten and tell him the facts I mentioned to him. So, I went and told him that by any interpretation of the terms of reference of the Boundary Commission, Cachar and Goalpara did not come under the purview of the Boundary Commission, and I requested him to make that clear to the Boundary Commission. He agreed with me regarding the interpretation of the reference, but he said that since the whole matter was left to arbitration and the whole inquiry was in the nature of a judicial proceeding, it would not be proper for him to give a clear direction ; but again, he repeated to me that the terms were so obvious that they could not include the two districts.

Misgivings on Shillong

Then he asked me whether I knew of any place of higher altitude in Sylhet. I said, a large part of Sylhet is below sea level and I know of no place which was higher than two to four hundred feet. Then he brought me near a map and pointed out Shillong and the lower slopes of Khasi Hills. He said these areas were in Pakistan. I said that Shillong was the capital of Assam, and these areas were in Khasi and Jaintia Hills which were part of Assam. I came back without any more thought on the subject of this query then. In the meantime, the Khasi friends had an interview with Mr. Liaquat Ali and were arranging similar interviews with leaders of Pakistan. On the second day, it suddenly flashed on me if Lord Mountbatten's query was not in any way connected with these moves and interviews. In my suspicion I argued within myself if Lord Mountbatten might not also think in the way as the Khasi representatives. To whom shall I go in this hour of doubt, misgiving and confusion but to one who has always removed them with his loving sympathy ?

It was some time towards the end of July or beginning of August, 1947, and Gandhiji was sitting in his usual seat with only Srimati Amrit Kaur in the room. I narrated to him my fears and troubles mentioned above. But before I quite finished, he said : “I have heard all about your attitude regarding separation of Sylhet. Why did you agree to the referendum ?” I told him that I was no party to it. But immediately came the retort : “Can anything happen in a province without its Prime Minister becoming a party to it ?” I then told him all I knew : how Lord Mountbatten at a lunch, to which I was invited, said that he presumed I was indifferent about Sylhet going to Pakistan. I told him, however, that while it was true that a large number of the people in Assam Valley wanted Sylhet to be separated and at one time, even the Hindus of Sylhet wanted the same, the Congressmen of both the places wanted to live together as they fought a common fight together for ten long years under my leadership for weal or for woe. I told him also how Lord Mountbatten met the leader of Sylhet, the then Home Minister of our Cabinet (Sri Basanta Kumar Das), the same evening at a garden party and how the latter agreed to the referendum and how the Working Committee of the Congress endorsed it. I then put to him, “How can I fight the Working Committee ?” Then he said rather firmly, “Did I not tell you that you should be prepared to fight any wrong ? Why did you not do so ? Seven years ago you did a mistake in adopting satyagraha in trying to follow the Working Committee.”

Then referring to the subject under discussion he said, “I can do little for you. You had better gone to the Sardar.” I said, “I shall surely go to him, but, Bapu, you must do something.” He was then as if thinking aloud—“Once you agree to an evil, you do not know where it will lead you.” “I was sitting there full 8 to 10 minutes mute, while he was talking to himself and partially to Srimati Kaur. I read on his face a bitterness and a despair which, during the course of

25 years' experience, I had never seen before. He spoke in a very low tone : "I am never a man given to suspicion, much less act on suspicions. But looking at things around me, I feel suspicious of even the best actions of the Britisher." Then he became silent. I again repeated, "Bapu, will you not do anything for me ?" He did not reply but told me again, "Go to the Sardar". I obeyed him and went to the Sardar the next morning. I narrated my doubts and fears in the same way as I did to Bapuji; but Sardarji said that I was wrong in my suspicions, and that if I felt so strongly, why did I not speak to him earlier. I came back with the impression that he considered I was childish in my fears.

Misunderstanding

And verily I was ! The next evening Sardarji gave a party at the Imperial Hotel to the Rulers of the States and their representatives in the Constituent Assembly, to which he invited Lord Mountbatten and all his colleagues in the Cabinet, the Premiers of the Provinces and many personages. I had only been 3 to 4 minutes in the room when Sardarji started without any introduction of the subject, "You see, Bardoloi, there was clear misunderstanding ..." But by the time I began to understand him, an aide-de-camp of His Excellency was already at my side to tell me that his Excellency would talk to me. I went with him immediately and was about to take a seat nearby, but he made me sit by his side on the same settee he was occupying. He said, "On the day I met you, I could not explain to you certain things, which were yet confidential, but I can speak to you now. You see, Sir ...* was offered the Governorship of East Bengal. He had three small children and his wife (he mentioned their age). He could not keep them in Dacca in this heat. He was, therefore, wanting to know from me if there was any cooler place of higher altitude in East Bengal where he could keep his wife

* The name was not recorded in the original document. It refers to Sir Jinnah.

and children. He had just left my room when you came in ; and who could give better information about East Bengal and Sylhet than you ? I, therefore, wanted to know from you all about these places. And you possibly thought that I was thinking of ceding these areas to East Bengal, and then you spoke to Gandhiji"—with that he gave a big pinch to my arm. "As you know now, nothing could be further from my thoughts. I shall write to Gandhiji, but go and tell him all that I have told you"—(words are mine). All that I could say was that I was extremely sorry and ashamed. I told him that I am never a man given to suspicions; but in the extraordinary times and circumstances in which we were living, I had been subjected to unfounded doubts and fears. I told him how grateful I was for the frank manner in which he explained the matter to me. I could not meet Gandhiji; but I wrote to him to say how great was Lord Mountbatten and how small I was, and what a fool I had been to trouble him with my doubts and fears.

"Who Wants Me Now ?"

It was in the course of some of my visits during this time, that I perceived the inner agony from which he was suffering on account of the division of India, and the crimes that followed thereon. In one of those moments Bapuji uttered : "Who wants me now ?" I felt a sort of dart in my heart and came out with tears in my eyes.

People like us thought that since Independence is come, we would all settle down to the construction of a new India, and of a new province. But it appeared, to my great sorrow, that forces of disruption took possession of the minds of some people more than they had possibly at any time. Selfishness of the worst type seemed to take possession of men, from which even some Congressmen did not seem to escape. In this province the aftermath of Sylhet transfer and the atten-

dant evils of transfer of the poor clerks rendered the political situation bitter, and now a few letters were received by me threatening my murder by unknown hand. I was feeling perplexed as to what would be the best way to fight these evils—whether by remaining in government or going out of it; and I wrote a lengthy letter to Bapuji. But a long time after, he wrote back to say that while the conclusion arrived at by me was quite correct (my desire to resign), he would not hazard any advice as it would amount to a blind man leading the blind, and asked me to approach Kaka Saheb for advice. But what he wrote to me in the end of the letter was of importance. He wrote, ‘Set apart some time every morning and pray.’”

The last time that I saw him was when he was undergoing fast in the Birla House for the pacification of the communal feelings that were creating a wave of crimes in Delhi itself. The facts and the circumstances of this episode are so well known that I do not propose to bring my imperfect knowledge of things to describe the causes and effects of the same. It was 2 o'clock when I arrived at Birla House and directly went to the yard where Gandhiji was lying on the cot in the December sun of New Delhi. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Saheb was discussing with him the condition under which Gandhiji would be prepared to break his fast. I went and caught hold of his feet for a few seconds and kept standing near his legs for about 10 minutes. While the conversation was going on. He only smiled at me. I had full opportunity of studying his face and the pose in which he lay on cot. He was speaking in low but distinct tones with usual emphasis. He had the Burma hat given to him by Thakin Nu on his head, and his whole face was aglow with a radiance that I had not seen in him for several months. He was protected from the western sun by Dr. Sushila Nair and some other ladies. But nobody could miss the beaming happiness that was radiating from his face, apparently arising out of

divine duty done. Every moment of the talk, however, made me anxious about his condition—it was passing the seventh day of his fast; and I decided not to speak anything, although I came with determination to ask him to break the fast.

Immediately after the Maulana had finished, he beckoned me to his side, with a smile which will linger in my memory all the rest of my life. I took one step towards him, and told him that I had nothing to say and, with a *namaskar*, left his side to the place where the Maulana was talking with Dr. Nair and others. I did not listen to the conversation; but all the time I was contemplating on Bapu's fast and the duty that the same imposed on us.

The Last Interview

Little could I imagine then that this was the last time that I would have the chance of meeting him. To-day I feel an agony in my heart when I feel that I did not go near him even when he beckoned me, although I did so from the tenderest of feelings in me.

It was 6-15 p.m. on the 30th January, when a newspaper correspondent of Shillong asked me on the phone whether I had heard that Gandhi was shot dead while going to the prayer ? I simply did not believe him, but the next minute and the minute next and so on, did my phone begin to ring, sounding the same ominous query. I now felt it must be real and felt so stunned that I became mute for the time being. I did not really know what to do, where to go. And again came the conviction that it cannot be all true. I then sought a call with Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, and in 5 minutes, I got him to be only told that the light of India and the world had gone out from us for ever.

Is it possible to describe, in words, the void that we are feeling at this separation ? To me, he had always been a

force influencing or trying to influence every thought and action of my life. I know that I could not even expect to live upto what he wished of us; but the very fact that he was looking at us even from a distance, used to inspire us. During the last six years I felt that he infused in me a strength which only a spiritual leader could bless his followers with. His advice was seldom in the nature of "do this, and do that", but always to inspire me with courage to fight out anything that I consider evil or wrong.

APPENDIX II

BARDOLOI ON GANDHISM

(Tribute to Gandhiji on his 70th Birthday)

Gandhiji is completing his seventieth year and his birthday falls today. It is worth our while to ponder over the greatness and glory of this unique life.

In the midst of this devastating war, with its political make-beliefs and diplomatic intrigues, the simplicity and directness of Gandhiji's methods are making a stronger appeal to the minds of all thinking people. The impending destruction of mankind as a result of the pursuance of former methods is forcing on us the truth and reality of the latter. It is becoming clearer every day that the old order of material exploitation of one country by another and of one nation by another must yield to a new order where countries and nations must not only live as equals to one another, but must cease to think, speak and act in terms of material exploitation of the weaker by the stronger.

The difficulty of attaining this ideal will be readily realised from the fact that in theory this ideal was supposed to have been guiding the League of Nations, all the time when this impending catastrophe was in the making, and how feeble its voice has been in preventing it. Russia was indeed experimenting on a new ideology, and not a few thoughtful people of the world turned their eyes to the land of the Soviet Republic for the ushering in of a new era of peace and contentment into this world. The recent activities of the Russian

Government, however, have disillusioned many; and although as politicians we may have been wise enough not to be too critical about its present activities in Poland and elsewhere, the fact probably remains that the Russian ideology cannot be the basis of a new world order.

It is quite patent that the basic reason for this failure is that there is in the minds of all the modern nations an inherent belief in violence, exploitation, race-hatred and many other evils, which, if they existed in any degree in any society of individuals, we would have been living in a "state of nature." It has never been realised fully that what can be evil in a society of individuals can be equally an evil in a society of "groups of individuals". It is undoubtedly recognised in all civilised societies that a man must not steal, must not covet his neighbour's property and not do many other things which will wrong his neighbour's interests. Nay we believe in loving our neighbour as we do ourselves. But so far as nations are concerned, not only the principle of an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, of five bombs to one would continue, but it would also never be considered wrong to deprive a nation of all its wealth and prowess by means of force or hold a nation in subjugation by force against its determined will to be free. It seems that nations need not have any conscience for doing the right thing by its neighbours and that, as there is no power or force behind to create such a conscience, the world must live in this conflict of carnage and destruction.

Does the Gandhian ideology furnish any answer to this question? Surely it does; and however difficult the solution may be as an immediate objective, it is quite clear that nothing but the recognition of such ideals will be able to remove from this world this great evil of world catastrophe. It is quite clear that a thing like "national conscience" based on the consciousness of equal rights of all nations of the

world—big or small—must come to all nations ; and as by the nature of things physical force cannot achieve it—for it would mean only mean the installation of another superior State in arms—the basic sanction for developing this conscience must be moral. Mahatmaji, like all the other greatest religious preachers of the world, has rightly placed the moral stimuli in individuals on a higher plane than the physical. But his sense of the practical has led him to travel beyond the domain of the word alone. It has made him launch many schemes the adoption of which might develop in the individual as well as in the nation the moral sense necessary to rid them of any tendency towards exploitation. The individuals of India and the nationhood of India are his immediate concern; but that does not mean that, subject to such variations as the climatic conditions and culture of any particular nation may necessitate, the ideals experimented upon by him cannot be held to be good for other nations also. If he could forge a weapon for the independence of India at Sevagram, he could as well create the moral force for the emancipation of the world from its present day annihilating and barbarous tendencies.

Truth and Non-violence are simple enough words in themselves and their dictionary meaning is easily available. But what is not available and will not be available to many is their implication in the realities of life, even of individuals. How many of us have been able to follow in life all that these words stand for in their full implication. But, while this training in non-violence and truth is so very difficult in individuals, the difficulty of creating a moral “national conscience” is still greater. But that is also exactly the reason why we must have such a conscience in the nations, that they may cease to live the brute life that they are living.

It is no doubt admitted that the present day economic order in Europe is one factor which is more responsible for

the existing mentality of the European nations than anything else. Exploitation of the non-mechanised and less mechanised nations by the mechanised and the more mechanised ones has led to the installation of what is known as "capitalism". Under this order the world must be made to exist for those nations who have been imbued with capitalist conscience, in other words, Imperialism. The standards of life of some have been raised to a so called high level resulting in the lowering of many others to a state of starvation and nakedness. But while these capitalists of different nations reduce three-fourths of the population of the earth to that abject condition, can they remain in any state of peace ? The answer has been furnished by the present day war. Russia did give some exhibition of its intolerance of the above methods; but such are the evils of a mechanised state that, in spite of its anti-imperialistic ideology, it is probably falling into the same pit from which it wanted to extricate itself.

A new economic order must therefore be brought into existence, where any kind of exploitation would not be possible. The moral conscience of man must be so trained that in place of the idea of unholy competition and exploitation of his neighbour, service to him and society must find full scope. Mechanisation should be avoided or at least the evils resulting therefrom should be reduced to the lowest limit. Man must live by the sweat of his brow, and such leisure as is available must be utilised for the culture of the spirit, which alone would make the existence of a real non-exploiting mentality possible. It is only in an atmosphere of this kind that a non-exploiting and non-violent national conscience can grow resulting in world peace.

In his village home at Sevagram, Mahatmaji is trying to solve the riddle of the world. May God give him long life to bring unto the unthinking and unconvinced nations of the world the great truth of his great doctrine, and to usher in a

new world order of peace and goodwill among the nations of the world.

Gopinath Bardoloi

[The Article was published on the occasion of Gandhiji's 70th birthday in Assam Tribune, Guwahati].

**CIRCULAR LETTER TO THE MEMBERS
OF THE CONGRESS PARTY IN ASSAM
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY- 1945**

To

Members, Legislative Assembly

Dear Friend,

You have no doubt learnt from the summons issued to you that the Budget Session of the Assembly starts from the 1st of March 1945. As decided last time we continue the policy of giving importance to and attend the House only on matters that vitally concern us. After consultation with the party members, I had given indication of the line of activity to be pursued by us in my speech in the last Assembly. For further clarification I repeat them.

1. To see that freedom of speech, of association, of movement, of the press etc. are assured. This means that the question of security prisoners, and of those under restrictions outside, should form the most important item of our work. To this may be added the question regarding the revival of the Congress Organization removal of ban on meetings in the various districts etc. Questions, resolutions, and motions may accordingly be submitted.

2. The present distribution of seats in the Local Boards and principles underlying the same, must also be taken up by us for questions, resolutions and motions. The injustice done to particular districts must be taken up by the members representing those districts.

3. Food scarcity—in oil, of consumable articles such as *dal*, *ata*, etc. must also form part of the programme. In this connection, the question of distribution and procurement may be taken up. It should be the attempt of all of us to expose all corruptions, *wherever they are found*.

4. Land settlement questions must be particularly dealt with by the members of Nowgong, Kamrup and Darrang districts in a searching manner and all must take part in it. All informations of encroachments, their validity by government orders, and all departure from the policy enunciated by Government in the past and the present, should particularly be made the target of attack.

You may also put up local questions of importance, but how far they may be made the subject of the party attendance in the Assembly, will be decided later on.

As regards the attendance of members under restrictions, I repeat Mahatmaji's advice to the effect that members should not generally apply for permission, but if exigency so demands, they may do so in consultation with their leader. I did accordingly asked both Mr. Chanda and Sj. Purna Chandra Sarma to apply for dealing with the Land Settlement question and the procurement scheme in the Surma Valley districts. I do think even now that those members, whose health is well enough, should attend the Assembly by all means, and do their duty by their constituency and the country on the most vital questions. But I would not go the length of asking such members as may have conscientious objection

to apply. I hope to discuss this point with Gandhiji, I get a chance of meeting him in the meanwhile, but at present, I am communicating my attitude in accordance with his previous directions.

Mahatmaji's advice in this connection runs as follows :—

“Duties of Legislators : Members of the Assembly outside jail should attend the Assembly in order to register their views on important matters such as Land/Settlement, Food, Evacuation etc. Internee M.L.As, should not apply for permission to attend the Assembly but if the gravity of the situation so demands, they may do so. In cases like these, exigency is the governing factor and that is to be decided by the Party or its leader.”

(Sd) Gopinath Bardoloi
Leader, Assam Congress Legislature Party
Shillong

APPENDIX IV

MAHATMA GANDHI ON ESTABLISHING KASTURBA MEMORIAL TRUST IN ASSAM

Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi was a true disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. At the critical stage, before and after the new independence of India it was Gandhiji who was constantly guiding in moulding Assam right from the Assembly politics, constructive work, to other domestic matters which he thought the local people should settle the problems themselves. Bapu was a dear and loving father of Gopinath Bardoloi, the then Chief Minister of Assam.

After the death of Kasturba Gandhi, Gandhiji thought of introducing a Kasturba Memorial Fund Scheme. This he meant, specifically should be an institution where there will be training of female workers. It was in 1945, on the 10th February, just after 11 months and twelve days, that the workers from Assam met Gandhiji, regarding the scheme. The workers were led by Lokapriya Bardoloi. He informed Gandhiji that women folk from Assam have volunteered to work for Kasturba Memorial Fund Scheme and that they have already applied for the same. This surprised Gandhiji, that till then no training school had been opened, not even in Sevagram.

A vivid description of the interview with Gandhiji by the team of workers under the leadership of Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi is given here.

“Here is an account of the interview with Mahatmaji-*Kasturba Memorial Fund*: On the 10th February '45 we interviewed Gandhiji and spoke to him about the necessity of training female workers, who had volunteered to work for the Kasturba Memorial Fund Scheme and accordingly had applied to us. Mahatmaji said that no training school has been opened yet any where not even at Sevagram. But to quote his words he remarked ‘that there is no institution here does not mean that nothing is being done here. Much is being done but not of an institutional character yet.’ He, however, requested us to see round people connected with these works. On the other hand he remarked that ‘Forty is a good number. Why should they wait if they had any action in mind? Let them give the lead! It seemed to us that some kind of model institution at Sevagram was in contemplation.

As regards the training in the educational portion of the Scheme was concerned, Late Smt. Ashadevi Aryanayakam was an interested worker and so under the Instructions of Gandhiji Lokapriya Bardoloi with his team met her. It was Gandhiji's wish that two ladies from Assam should be sent to Wardha and Sevagram to stay for a month and get adequate idea about the Scheme and also imbibe the spirit in which provincial training centre was to run.

As regards constructive work, the Scheme from Assam was approved in general. This was Khadi, Village Industries, *Go-seva* and agriculture, basic education etc. Lokapriya Bardoloi who could not stay without asking Gandhiji about this scheme also had an interview. As regards individual workers wanting to carry on the work he said, “You should let him it on his own responsibility. An individual becoming his own organisation naturally is above any other organisation. He must act as he chooses and take the consequence.”

For works in the Ashram Gandhiji advised Lokapriya Bardoloi to meet Shri Krishnadas Jaju, the then Secretary,

All India Spinners' Association. Shri Parvekar of *Go-seva* and Agriculture, Shri J. C. Kumarappa and Shri Jhaverbhai P. Patel of Village Industries and Smt. Ashadevi of Basic Education. Accordingly it was done. Bardoloi with his team did the purchasing of the available literatures and made mental note of what they said. On the question of opening a provincial centre they (members selected by Gandhiji) said that a syllabus covering a period of training from six months to four years was in preparation. Ashadevi was made Secretary. The main points that was stressed by every one of them was not so much to mechanical training for workers in crafts but imbibing the spirit and the philosophy of the whole endeavour of establishing self-dependent units of villages under Gandhiji's leadership. Before leaving Wardha Lokapriya Bardoloi and party met Gandhiji again and the message is given below :

“The programme of constructive work is more than law and Parliamentary work. Its completion means complete swaraj won by truth and non-violence. What is true of you is true of every congressman, be he or she great or not. This is my message. Try to learn from the men here how it works and how ennobling it is.”

APPENDIX V

**MIRABEN'S LETTER TO
GOPINATH BARDLOI**

Malki, Shillong
1.2.48

Dear Mr. Bardoloi,

May I be allowed to thank you for yesterday's most beautiful and impressive gathering especially for your address? It made me feel more strongly than ever what I have often felt before—namely what a tremendous task you who are Gandhiji's friends and followers, have taken upon your shoulders in trying to carry his way and life into the political world. To do it while he was still here to turn to for guidance and strength must have been difficult enough; to face the future without him is a burden almost too heavy to bear.

Please do not trouble to answer this note. On pondering today over what you had said I suddenly felt I must write and assure you of my deep sympathy and for what it is worth, of my unswerving support in your heroic attempts to give life and reality to Bapu's ideals in this province.

With warm regards and deep respect.

Yours very sincerely,

Margaret Ben

(Margaret Slade who was known as Mira Ben as named by Bapu wrote to Lokapriya Bardoloi praising for his heroic act in carrying out Gandhiji's teachings.)

BARDOLOI'S REPRESENTATION BEFORE THE CABINET MISSION

(Extracts from the Minutes of the Meeting between the Cabinet Delegation, Field Marshal Viscount Wavell and Gopinath Bardoloi on Monday April 1, 1946 at 4.50 PM)¹

Secret

Mr. Bardoloi said, in reply to a question from the Viceroy Field Marshal Wavell that he was prepared to make a statement of what he regarded as the best method of bringing about a political settlement, but he desired to make it plain at the outset, that the Congress President alone was competent to speak on the general question, and he could give only personal opinion. He felt that under a constitution of United States type, a real adjustment between the Muslim League and Congress would be possible. The Centre would have to retain responsibility for communications etc. defence, foreign relations, special powers for emergency measures together with the right to take for these purposes. But to secure this, the complete separation desired by Mr. Jinnah was not necessary and it would be sufficient if more powers were given to the units. He felt that Mr. Jinnah should accept this point of view. He considered the two-nation theory to be necessary to proceed without accommodating him. The process of giv-

1. *The Transfer of Power*, Vol. VII, (1942-47) p. 76, edited by Nicholas Mansergh

ing the Muslims a share in the administration must, he felt, be a democratic one.

In his view, Mr. Jinnah's stand would, if acceded to, result in civil war, but if he refused to come to an agreement, independence must nevertheless be granted and given, if necessary, without him. No one should be allowed to arrest the process.

If Mr. Jinnah agreed to formation of provinces based on linguistic divisions (and this was what the Congress had desired for many years), the province (Assam) should have greater autonomy than under the 1935 Act. The Centre's powers should be limited, and the residual powers should rest with the provinces. A United States of India was the ideal, the main executive functions remaining with the provinces.

As regards what was immediately possible, he pointed out that if Mr. Jinnah reached some agreement with the Congress, it would be easy to effect a settlement. He stressed that a near failure of agreement (Sic) on account of unreasonableness must not stand in the way of transfer of power. A government should immediately be set up at the Centre, by asking the Provinces to nominate persons to a panel from which the Viceroy would choose his interim government. Even if Sindh and Bengal stood out, 27 out of India's 32 crores would be represented. In his view Punjab would come in. The provisional government, summoned in this way, would have the function of setting up a Constituent Assembly, negotiating with Jinnah if necessary, drawing up a constitution for new India and conducting negotiations with the states. The British Government would have to make it clear that power had really been transferred to this provisional government, and any delay in the transfer would be highly dangerous.

Condition in Assam

He then described the situation in Assam. The province (with Sylhet included) has been a unit for about 3,000 years. The Assam kingdom had been maintained until the British arrived. At that time, the district of Sylhet was a part of Bengal, and though there had been several attempts by the Muslims to conquer the province, in 1901 there were only 7% of Muslims in the population excluding Sylhet. The juncture of Assam with Bengal in 1905 led to a large infiltration of Muslims with the result that the Muslim population had grown from 3 lakhs to 13 lakhs in the Assam Valley proper. Only Muslims immigrants had entered. And in Assam with Sylhet district combined there were now 33% of Muslims. It was preposterous for Mr. Jinnah to say that the whole of Assam should be included in Pakistan.

In reply to Sir Stafford Cripps, Mr. Bardoloi said the Congress would not object to the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, as its people and culture were predominantly Bengali. Before 1874, the district was administered by a Commissioner. In 1874, it was decided to include the district as part of Assam. In 1924 and again in 1926, the Assam Legislative Council passed a resolution that the district should be transferred to Bengal and a similar resolution was passed by the Bengal Legislative Council in 1926. Now, however, the Muslims of Sylhet opposed the separation of the district from Assam, as they gained advantages in the way of representation in government services etc. and Sylhet being a permanently settled deficit district, which has to be maintained by the people of Assam Valley, the relations between the two regions were liable to be strained. This was the main argument for cutting off Sylhet from the province.

It was a province with considerable resources, but the Government of India by absorbing the royalty on oil, had

taken a great deal of money out of it. About 260 million lbs of tea were produced every year, 90% of which was exported, but the export duty was realised by the Government of India in Calcutta, and the revenue lost to the Province. In return, the Province, though one of the poorest, got only 30 lakhs subvention from the Central Government. To enable Assam to utilise its resources in its own interest, he felt that the fullest possible autonomy should be given to it.

In reply to a question from the Viceroy, Mr. Bardoloi said he could not agree that there was a large area of uncultivated land in Assam ; this was Muslim League propaganda. The Muslim League has been sending in Muslims to occupy grazing areas, and these Muslims from Bengal were maiming and killing cattle and oppressing the inhabitants. On account of this, Sir Muhammad Saadullah had agreed that they should be evicted, but until now nothing has been done, and the present government intended to carry out his policy in accordance with the agreement. It was incorrect to say that there was vacant land available. Much of the land was under water for a large part of the year. It was true that in the hills there were undeveloped areas, but one had to avoid denudation, and most of the land would be required to make up economic holdings. In the valleys too, once land had been provided for those with uneconomic holdings (e.g. with less than one acre) there would not be enough land to go round. It was untrue that Congress was preventing export of grain from the Province.

The Hill Tribes

As regards the position of the hill tribes, he wished to produce a memorandum by the Rev. J. J. M. Nichols Roy, a Khasi Christian and a Minister in the present Assam Government. The hill people were also anxious for some degree of autonomy, and although the tribes in North of

Assam were generally still somewhat savage, the relations between the hill people in the south and those in Assam valley were friendly. The Khasis have an advanced form of self-government. The Jayantias were also in an advanced state of civilisation. He had no doubt that these tribes would be willing to be associated with the Assam Government, though they would desire a high degree of autonomy. He would like Manipur state to be in a similar position and he hoped that the ruler would agree.

The tribes in the country north of Brahmaputra would be administered by the provincial government. Part of the cost was now being met out of provincial revenues, and the expenses of the Assam Rifles were shared between the central and provincial governments. Some provision for the external defences would be necessary, but he felt sure the provincial resources were adequate to pay for administering this area. Sir Stafford Cripps pointed out that the matter would be one for arrangement between the Centre and the Provinces, and Mr. Bardoloi concurred.

The Secretary of State said that the Delegation at this stage was to explore the situation. If there were to be a Pakistan region, including Eastern Bengal, Sylhet might go with East Bengal. Did Bardoloi agree that on this hypothesis, the remainder of Assam could unite with the main part of India? Mr. Bardoloi replied that loss of Sylhet would not make much difference to communications between Assam and the rest of India.

Mr. Bardoloi said that he was definitely against Pakistan, but the land tenures etc. in Sylhet, were similar to those in Bengal, and if there was a hypothetical United states of India, the district should form part of Bengal area, rather than the Assam area. He had no doubt that the Congress would be

willing to meet the expenses of the tribal areas, though external defence would have to be paid by the Centre.

The Constitution-making Body

The Secretary of State informed Mr. Bardoloi that one purpose of their visit was to accelerate the setting up of a Constitution-making body. What were Mr. Bardoloi's views on the best method of selecting to such a body? Mr. Bardoloi replied that he thought it was unnecessary to delay for adult franchise, and the representatives should be sent to sit with people from other Provinces. The selection need not, however, be limited to people with seats in the Legislature. The best people would be wanted, and there should be powers to send names from any part of India, and for the constitution-making body to coopt in case of need. All communities should as far as possible be represented.

Even if Mr. Jinnah did not agree to the Interim Government, the Provinces should have the right to send in a panel of names, not necessarily from the Province itself. Panels of names could be submitted by each Government as responsible to the Legislature i.e. they would be selected rather than elected.

In conclusion, Mr. Bardoloi asked whether he could take any message from the Delegation. Sir Stafford Cripps said that he felt that it was for Indians to help at this stage and the Secretary of State added that their cards had been placed at the table. They intended to make the independence of India an accomplished fact and were whole-hearted and sincere in this attempt.

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